

Birds of Prey

By Bob Garrison

Nothing captures the essence of wild California better than the sight of a bird of prey soaring over sun-bleached hills and valleys.

Their majestic stature, large size and sheer numbers make them an ideal focus of your fall wildlife viewing. Thirty-four species of hawks, owls, eagles, falcons and vultures can be found throughout the state. As winter approaches, many birds of prey, also known as raptors, migrate into the state from colder areas to the north.

Certain areas, such as Hawk Hill in Marin County, provide spectacular views of hundreds of raptors soaring past on their travels south. The search for food drives most raptors to warmer climates where rodents, rabbits, birds, reptiles and insects remain plentiful.

Viewing birds of prey can be as simple as watching roadside fence posts and power poles for red-tailed hawks and kestrels. With a bit more effort and a little studying, you can easily spot five to 10 species of raptors on a day's excursion.

The first step is investing in a bird field guide and reading about the habits of each bird of prey found in the area you plan to visit. The next step is to search out the natural habitats where the birds reside. Start by visiting a few of the watchable wildlife locations listed below for guaranteed success. Once you arrive, your bird guide is a must for identifying one species from the next. With a little practice, you will be able to identify a raptor simply by its shape, location, and behaviors.

Viewing Tips

- Use binoculars to get a close view. Do not get close enough to disturb the birds.
- Buy a good quality bird field guide which provides natural history information, range maps and color drawings of the birds of your area.
- Think like a mouse. You will find raptors where their prey is located. Unplowed fields with nearby perches are ideal locations to view raptors.
- Watch the skies in open areas for soaring birds of prey. To save energy, raptors glide around on uprising air currents to gain height before moving to a different area.
- Scan solitary power poles, fence posts or trees for perching birds of prey.
- In areas with cliff, barns or tall trees, look for the whitewashed droppings of hawks or the regurgitated pellets of owls. These telltale markings will often lead you to a raptor's favorite perch. Some of the more reclusive birds of prey are hard to spot any other way.

Birds of Prey Viewing Locations in California

Follow wildlife viewing road signs or check the California Wildlife Viewing Guide for directions to the following areas:

Klamath Basin National Wildlife Refuge — wintering bald eagles, owls, falcons, hawks

Arcata Marsh — osprey, bald eagles, peregrine falcons, short-eared owls, hawks

Gray Lodge Wildlife Area — barn owls, black-shouldered kites, northern harriers, hawks

Golden Gate National Recreation Area (Hawk Hill) — 19 species, 12,000 individuals migrate through

Mount Diablo State Park — golden eagles, kestrels, turkey vultures, owls, hawks

Coyote Hills Regional Park — great horned owls, kites, northern harriers, turkey vultures, hawks, falcons

Carrizo Plain — ferruginous hawks, northern harriers, prairie falcons, short-eared owls

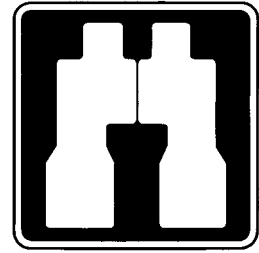
Millerton Lake — golden eagles, northern harriers, rough-legged hawks, wintering bald eagles

Mount Pinos — five owl species, northern goshawks, California and Andean condors

San Jacinto Wildlife Area — six species of owls, peregrine falcons, bald eagles, hawks

Cuyamaca Rancho State Park — golden eagles, red-shouldered hawks, bald eagles, turkey vultures

Harper Lake — long- and short-eared owls, northern harriers, prairie falcons, golden eagles



A Selection of Bird Field Guides

A good quality field guide is a must for beginning and advanced wildlife watchers. Every birder has a favorite guide, but here are a number of excellent guides to choose from. Most large book stores stock a number of guides, so take a look at a variety of guides before you select one. [Note: other quality guides have been published since this article was written in 1994]

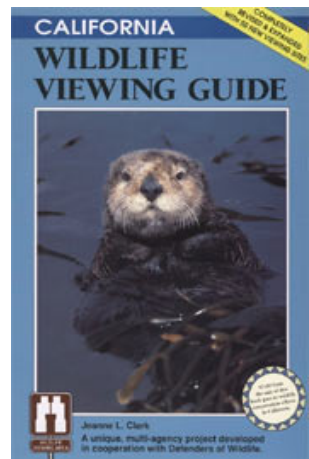
Field Guide to the Birds of North America, National Geographic

Birds of North America, Robbin, Bruun and Zim

Field Guide to Western Birds, Peterson

You can purchase a *California Wildlife Viewing Guide* which provides detailed wildlife viewing information and directions to these and over 190 other wildlife viewing sites by visiting www.CAWatchableWildlife.org.

Reprinted courtesy of *Outdoor California*, California Department of Fish and Game (www.dfg.ca.gov)



www.NatureTourismPlanning.com.