

Disappointing Year for Wintering Raptors - 2024-25 Survey Season

Our 2024-25 survey season for wintering raptors was one of the most disappointing we've experienced. Along the Boulder Reservoir survey route, we saw only 7.9 raptors/survey, the third lowest number since we began these surveys in 1983. On the South Rabbit route, we counted the second lowest numbers since 2011-12, when this route was separated off from the North Rabbit and Lykins Gulch routes.

We were partially saved by North Rabbit, where we saw a near-average 18.81 raptors per survey, including bald eagles (5.37/survey) and ferruginous hawks (1.5/survey) who hunted and foraged in crowded prairie dog colonies. But overall, our total raptor count along all seven survey routes was the third lowest since 2011-12.

Among individual species, this was our first annual survey when no one reported seeing a rough-legged hawk. Rough-legged hawk numbers have declined sharply in recent years as warming winter temperatures enable these arctic-nesting, small mammal hunters to find snow-free foraging areas north of Colorado.

Some of us had hoped that, after a mild fall and early winter, our persistent snows and half-dozen nights of subzero temperatures in January and February would push some rough-legs south into Boulder County (a few were reported just east of our study area); but it turned out that the northern plains experienced relatively mild temperatures throughout much of the winter, leaving expanses of snow-free foraging areas intact. Our much colder than average January and February appeared to be the exception.

Red-tailed hawk numbers were the lowest for any survey year since 2011. Thanks to the prairie dog feast at Dowe Flats, bald eagle numbers were the second highest since 2019. However, wintering golden eagles continue their long-term decline. Local extirpation of once common white-tailed jackrabbits, along with fragmentation of remaining prairie dog colonies, have likely contributed to this trend.

Ongoing cliff-nesting raptor observations indicate that most known golden eagle nesting territories within Boulder County remain occupied each spring and summer. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the eagles' apparent need to fly farther out onto the prairie to forage will have long-term impacts on their nest productivity.

Numbers of observed northern harriers and American kestrels were close to the 1990-2024 averages. Observed winter rarities included a merlin on the East County route and sharp-shinned hawks on East County and Lykins Gulch.

Here's a tabular summary. I will update the graphs next to spring. Thanks to all for your dedicated reporting. Steve

2024-25 Wintering Raptor Survey Results

Mean number per Survey

Route	Trips	FH	RT	RL	AK	M E	PF	BE	G E	N H	C H	SS	G H	Total
Boulder	26	0.46	5.27		0.85			0.85	0.16	0.27			0.04	7.8
East Count	15	0.20	9.33		5.27			1.73		0.13	0.07	0.08		16.8
Lykins Gulch	19	0.05	1.68		0.16			0.16				0.05		2.05
North Rabbit	26	1.50	7.62		3.15	0.04	0.04	5.37	0.69	0.58				18.81
South Rabbit	25	0.72	5.76		0.68			1.73	0.48	0.68				10.05
South Count	13	0.30	5.15		3.00		0.07	0.92	0.15	0.08	0.08			9.68
Stearns Lake	5	0.40	7.0		3.40			1.00		0.20				12.0
Total	129	3.73	41.81		16.51	0.04	0.011	11.76	1.48	1.96	0.15	0.13	0.04	77.19
Per km		0.026	0.290		0.115	0.00	0.001	0.082	0.010	0.012	0.001	0.001	0.00	0.536