

## Reviews

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### **Hawk Watch: A Video Guide to Eastern Raptors**

Richard K. Walton and Greg Dodge

Brownbag Productions

VHS version copyright 1998

DVD version (remastered and revised) copyright 2003

“Bird!” All eyes turn in the direction of the yell. You pick up a mid-sized brown bird at a range of about 75 yards, flying quickly away from your group. Just about the time you decide it is a hawk of some type, it disappears into a group of trees. “Cooper's Hawk,” announces the trip leader. How did she do that? As she reviews the points of identification that led her to Cooper's Hawk, you secretly wish that someone had gotten it on film so you could see it again. Wouldn't it be great to have a video resource to aid in the identification of raptors in flight?

*Hawk Watch: A Video Guide to Eastern Raptors* by Richard Walton and Greg Dodge fills this bill nicely. It is the only video guide to eastern raptors currently available, and so is an invaluable resource for anyone wishing to learn to identify the eastern birds of prey in flight. It covers a total of 19 species: the 16 expected eastern raptors, Black and Turkey Vulture, plus the western Swainson's Hawk, which is seen occasionally during the fall migration. Species occurring in the eastern US but not included in the guide are Snail Kite, Short-tailed Hawk, Gyrfalcon, and Crested Caracara.

The format for the guide is simple: 2 to 3 minutes of video of each species in various situations with a voice-over narration discussing identification strategies. In some cases, both juvenile and adult plumages are illustrated. The narration is clear and accurate. The use of stop-action and slow-motion ensures that the field marks can be clearly seen. Just as in the field, some of the birds appear at considerable distance, while others nearly fill the frame. The quality of the images is quite good. Species are grouped taxonomically in eight categories (vultures, buteos, falcons, etc.), but do not appear in checklist order. Each of these eight groupings is quickly accessible from the main menu, although the search button on most DVD remote controls will work as well. Also included is an “Author's Note” (3 1/2 pages of text on hawk watching) and a section titled “Resources”, which includes a bibliography containing all the most important reference books on hawk identification, a list of organizations devoted to raptors, a photo of a juvenile Red-tailed Hawk with body regions and field marks labeled, and a two-page glossary. Finally, there is a “Quiz” containing 18 numbered photos with an answer key.

Despite the title, many of the video sequences are not typical “hawk watch” views (i.e., distant specks high overhead). There are numerous eye-level shots and hunting sequences, including a Northern Harrier gliding over a marsh and a Swallow-tailed Kite snatching a nestling mockingbird. The

result is that all birders will benefit from this video, not just those few who frequent the hawk watch sites during the fall migration.

While I find no major flaws in the content of the guide, there are some weak areas. The film sequences of Merlin and Golden Eagle are disappointing. Most of the Merlin shots are of birds flying low to the ground, and with all the clutter (trees, fences, etc.) it is very hard to see the bird. The Golden Eagle sequence is shot almost entirely through an overstory of tree limbs, and the auto-focus camera zeroing in on the limbs frequently leaves the bird out of focus. Also, there is no film of an adult Golden Eagle. The quiz is a "slide show" of 18 still photos (instead of the 23 video clips in the VHS version of the quiz). Many of the photos are of perched birds instead of birds in flight. (So break out the Peterson's!) Inexplicably, Crested Caracara appears in the quiz, despite its omission from the rest of the guide.

If you already own and use *Hawk Watch* in VHS format, I would recommend upgrading to the DVD version. There is new film footage of seven species, each providing sharper, closer images than in the original version. The new shots of American Kestrel, Northern Harrier, Bald Eagle, and Osprey are especially good. Being able to quickly access each of the groups via the menu is a real time saver, although I was disappointed that the species aren't listed separately, necessitating fast-forwarding through the groups if you are looking for one species in particular. All of the footage appears sharper and brighter, and represents a significant improvement over the VHS version, which in many cases appears murky and colorless. The introduction to the disc, as well as the introductions to each section, now feature close-up video clips of perched birds. These replace the rather amateurish paste-up still images in the VHS version and represent a big improvement in the overall aesthetics of the guide. The buteos are more sensibly arranged, with the rarely seen Rough-legged Hawk appearing at the end of the group rather than between the Broad-winged and Red-tailed as was the case in the VHS edition. The one serious step backward is the "slide show" quiz described above, which is definitely inferior to the video clip quiz in the original VHS version.

Regardless of these minor flaws, *Hawk Watch: A Video Guide to Eastern Raptors* is a must-have for any birder who wants to learn to accurately identify diurnal birds of prey in flight. —*Bill Sanderson, Asheville, NC*

## **Shorebirds: A Guide to Shorebirds of Eastern North America**

Richard K. Walton and Greg Dodge

Brownbag Productions

DVD version (remastered and revised) copyright 2003

The updated version of *Shorebirds: A Guide to Shorebirds of Eastern North America* shows 38 shorebird species in different plumages and habitats. The video footage would be a great addition to any birdwatcher's