

**Where to Go Hawkwatching:
An Introduction and Directions to Fall Hawk Watch Sites in
Massachusetts***

by Paul M. Roberts

Where should you go hawkwatching? Massachusetts birders are fortunate in having many excellent sites from which to choose. Three of the state's premier hawkwatching sites are discussed in some detail below. Go to any of these three locations in September, on a weekend in October and early November, or on a weekday with a nice cold front, and you are likely to find another hawkwatcher or two. Additional pairs of eyes are quite valuable, and their experience may be helpful in identification. Wachusett Mountain averaged over 12,000 hawks a season over 24 years, and that total represents primarily September counts, as later coverage is sporadic. With better coverage in October and early November, the average would likely be much higher. Mount Watatic has averaged 7700 hawks a season over fourteen years and 11,400 over the past five years. (Watatic numbers basically reflect more extensive coverage in the second half of the season.) Mount Tom averages around 2500 hawks with only several days' coverage a year, primarily during Broadwing season. No doubt many more hawks would be seen at either site with additional coverage.

You need not go to a major site to see a good flight, however, especially in September. Massachusetts has many excellent but lesser known and infrequently covered hawkwatch sites, several of which are briefly described below.

Be Prepared

When you go hawkwatching, take clothing more than adequate to keep you warm. It can turn quite cold on windy, exposed hawkwatch sites. Also take adequate food and drink. If the hawks are flying, you won't want to leave the site in pursuit of physical sustenance. It's also advisable to take binoculars, a spotting scope, a compass, a

notebook, and one or more friends with you. The more eyes the better. The compass will help you find the site and evaluate the view as well as determine flight directions. The notebook is for recording the numbers you count, the time you see each bird or kettle, and what you observe about the hawks, including questions you have about the birds you can't identify. Using your binoculars and scope, you should regularly scan the sky in all directions, including directly overhead and behind you. It's amazing how many hawks can pass by unnoticed, only to be seen flying away from you! Finally, you should take several field guides with you, so you can look up those questionable birds.

With time, patience, good judgment, and a bit of luck, you can discover the unique rewards of hawkwatching. *

Major Massachusetts Fall Hawkwatch Sites

Mount Tom State Reservation, Easthampton, MA

Mount Watatic, Ashburnham, MA

Wachusett Mountain State Park, Princeton, MA

Other Massachusetts Fall Hawkwatch Sites

Barre Falls Dam, Barre Falls

Bolton Flats, Lancaster

Downtown, Newburyport

Page School, Route 113, West Newbury

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Wachusett Mountain State Park, Princeton, MA

The best-known site in Massachusetts is Wachusett Mountain (2004 feet), a monadnock offering excellent views in all directions. The primary advantages of Wachusett are its proximity to many eastern Massachusetts birders – it is only an hour west of Boston – and that you can drive to the summit (the road opens at 9 a.m. Memorial Day through the last Sunday in October). The summit also accommodates people more comfortably than can Mount Tom, which can be both an asset and a liability on weekends when foliage is at peak. If you prefer to hike, there are a number of beautiful trails to the summit. When the road is closed, the Pine Hill Trail is the shortest, quickest, and of course steepest route to the summit, requiring about twenty minutes.

In fall, the best observation site is from the northeast edge of the summit parking lot, scanning the sky from Gardner in the northwest to Boston in the east and Worcester to the south/southeast. A second lookout only several dozen yards away, just to the right of the fire tower, provides a good view to the west and northwest.

Another good site is the Oxbow, located just a relatively short walk (quarter mile) from the Visitor Center on the “down road” only a few hundred feet from its merger with the “up road.” When winds are strong, thermals are often blown apart, encouraging hawks to tend to rely more on orographic lift, created by wind deflecting off surfaces like mountain slopes or ridges. Also, some species, such as sharpshins, tend to be ridge fliers, using orographic lift to help them migrate and often to hunt in the process. Even under prime thermal conditions in September, with Broad-winged Hawks kettling by hundreds or thousands, a number of sharpshins, kestrels, and other hawks may skirt the summit. (Hawkwatching from Little Wachusett, to the south of Wachusett, long ago revealed that at times a number of hawks don’t go over the summit, or past the Oxbow.) Late in the season, when you’re looking for birds such as Red-tailed and Red-shouldered hawks that don’t migrate as far as Broad-winged Hawks, the Oxbow may offer excellent views of hawks that might not be seen from the summit.

Directions: Take Route 2 to Route 140 (south) in Westminster. Take Route 140 south several miles to Wachusett Lake, where you turn right onto Mile Hill Road,

following the signs to the Wachusett Mountain Ski Area. Drive past the ski area to the reservation entrance partially up the mountain on your right. Restrooms and water are available in the Visitor Center to your left. Immediately inside the reservation, turn right again onto the all-weather road to the summit. Don't have an extra large coffee on your way to the hawkwatch. There are no facilities on the summit. The drive to the restrooms is about three miles roundtrip. You can pretty well guarantee that when you drive to the restrooms, the flight or the bird of the day will occur.

Mount Watatic, Ashburnham, MA

Mount Watatic (1832 ft) has emerged as one of New England's top hawkwatching sites, due to the efforts of Tom McCullough and, more recently, Petti Staub. The bad news is that a moderately long, steep hike is required to reach the site. The good news is that means there is no auto congestion and relatively few people at the watch on any one day. Fall hawkwatching is best done from East Watatic, the bare knob to the southeast of the summit. Watatic, the southern terminus of the twenty-mile-long Wapack range or ridge, is an excellent site for observing thermal and ridge fliers.

Directions: From Boston, take Route 2 west to Route 31, then 31 north to Route 12. Follow Route 12 to Ashburnham, turn right onto Route 101, and take it to Route 119. Turn left onto Route 119. After .7 miles you will see the first trail on your right, at the power lines. This is the shortest but steepest and most rugged way to the summit. The half-mile hike takes thirty minutes. I recommend continuing .8 mile west on 119 to an off-road parking area and an old logging road on your right. Two easier trails to the summit begin here. The beautiful Blueberry Ledge trail is 1.1 miles long and takes about forty-five minutes. The Nutting Hill trail is 1.9 miles and takes an hour. (Recent, controversial construction has affected the summit.) East Watatic is quite exposed to strong winds; pack adequate clothing and beverage. Water and restrooms are not available on the mountain.

Mount Tom State Reservation, Easthampton, MA

The first major hawkwatch site identified in New England (1936), Mount Tom , at 1202 feet, offers beautiful views of the Connecticut River Valley. In the fall, Goat's Peak Tower is the best observation point. It is essential to use the tower, and that is one of the drawbacks to Mount Tom. On weekends, when a good flight is anticipated, the tower can be crowded. On such occasions some hawkwatchers will migrate to Skinner State Park, across the Connecticut River from Mount Tom, to hawkwatch.

Directions: Take Interstate 91 north from Interstate 90. Take Exit 17W onto Route 141, continuing 1.7 miles to the reservation entrance, Christopher Clark Road, to the east. Take Clark Road 2.9 miles. Not far beyond the park headquarters, you'll see a large parking lot to your right. Park here, and walk up the surfaced road that climbs the hill at the rear of the lot. A fairly steep ten-minute hike will take you to Goat's Peak Tower. Restrooms are available at the park headquarters.

Other Massachusetts Fall Hawkwatch Sites

Barre Falls Dam, Barre Falls

Recently discovered by Bart Kamp, Barre Falls has the potential to be a very good site. From the east, take Route 2 west to Route 68 south in Gardner. Follow Route 68 through the center of Hubbardston to Route 62 west. Follow Route 62 west about 3 miles to the entrance to Barre Falls Dam on the left. About a half mile down on the left is an unpaved parking lot, which is the hawkwatch site. Restrooms can be found further down the road, next to the picnic area.

Bolton Flats, Lancaster

Many hawks tend to fly along the Interstate 495 ridge and cut southwest across the flats. This is one of the most promising sites in Massachusetts. From Interstate 495 in Bolton, take Route 117 west. Cross Route 110, and turn right into the Bolton Flats Wildlife Management Area parking lot. Scout along Route 117 for good views to the north and east. *In October this is a hunting area, so hawkwatch only on Sundays in the late Fall.*

Downtown, Newburyport

Downtown Newburyport between Cashman Park and the public parking lot east of the Route 1 bridge, offers excellent opportunities. Some observers, like Jim Barton, have had good numbers of Osprey coming from coastal New Hampshire and turning westward up the Merrimack here. On October 3, 1998, Rick Heil observed a flight of 250 hawks, including an amazing 71 Ospreys, 57 Northern Harriers, 5 Merlins, and 13 Peregrine Falcons (*Fall 1998 EMHW Report*). The assumption is that hawks migrating close to the coast follow the southwest-oriented curve of the New Hampshire coast and continue southwest through Newburyport rather than swing southeast toward Plum Island.

Page School, Route 113, West Newbury

The Page School appears to be most productive on the day of or following strong northwest winds. As many as 5000 hawks have been seen here in a single day. Take

Route 113 west from Interstate 95 in West Newbury. Cross the Artichoke Reservoir (Garden Street on left). In about .8 mile after Garden Street, the entrance to the Page School will be on your right. Drive left around to the back of the school building. On weekdays, when school is in session, please stop at the school office to request permission to hawkwatch.