Record-breaking Broad-wing migration count

The 2024 raptor migration is upon us and the Bridger Bowl Hawkwatch site is already recording historic numbers up on the ridge. Sunday, September 14th, the 33rd annual Bridger Bowl Hawkwatch crew observed a record-breaking Broad-winged Hawk migration count from the top of Bridger Bowl. Last season the crew counted 81 Broad-winged Hawks; which was the season record at the time. On Sunday 110 were counted between 11:00 and 16:00, blowing the previous record through the roof in just one day of observation. Furthermore, the count is up to 179 total Broad-winged Hawks on the season thus far as of Monday, September 16 -- end of day.

Broad-winged Hawks are forest buteos that nest in deciduous or mixed forests of Southern Canada as far west as Alberta, and the Eastern United States. Each year they travel over 4,000 miles to their wintering grounds in Southern Mexico, Brazil, and Bolivia. We don't know why their migration routes are changing or to what extent, but one working hypothesis is that recent severe wildfires in Canada may have caused a portion of the breeding population to expand west in search of forested habitat. Some unique features include a dark trailing edge on their underwings and a distinctly banded tail compared to other buteos.

Steve Hoffman, the founder of HawkWatch International and principal investigator of the Bridger migration project was present to witness the astonishing migration of Broad-wingeds on Sunday. Steve said to some passers-by: "this may be the single most incredible wildlife viewing experience of your entire life." The hikers grabbed some binoculars and watched hawks fly by in large groups, or kettles. One notable sighting included a kettle of 12 Broad-winged Hawks all circling together and passing by right overhead. A strong eastern wind and partly cloudy skies helped usher hawks close along the ridge and stand out in contrast with the clouds. The crew from Outside Bozeman magazine, a local outdoor publication, also hiked to the peak to help count for the day and be a part of the frenzy. They scanned the skies tirelessly and greatly assisted with the official counters' efforts so that no hawks slipped by unnoticed.

The team conducts raptor counts on the ridge from 10am-6pm, seven days a week until Halloween. Extra eyes on the sky are invaluable to the project, regardless of experience level with hawk identification. We welcome you to hike up to help the crew, learn about our apex predators of the sky, and help contribute to a record breaking season.