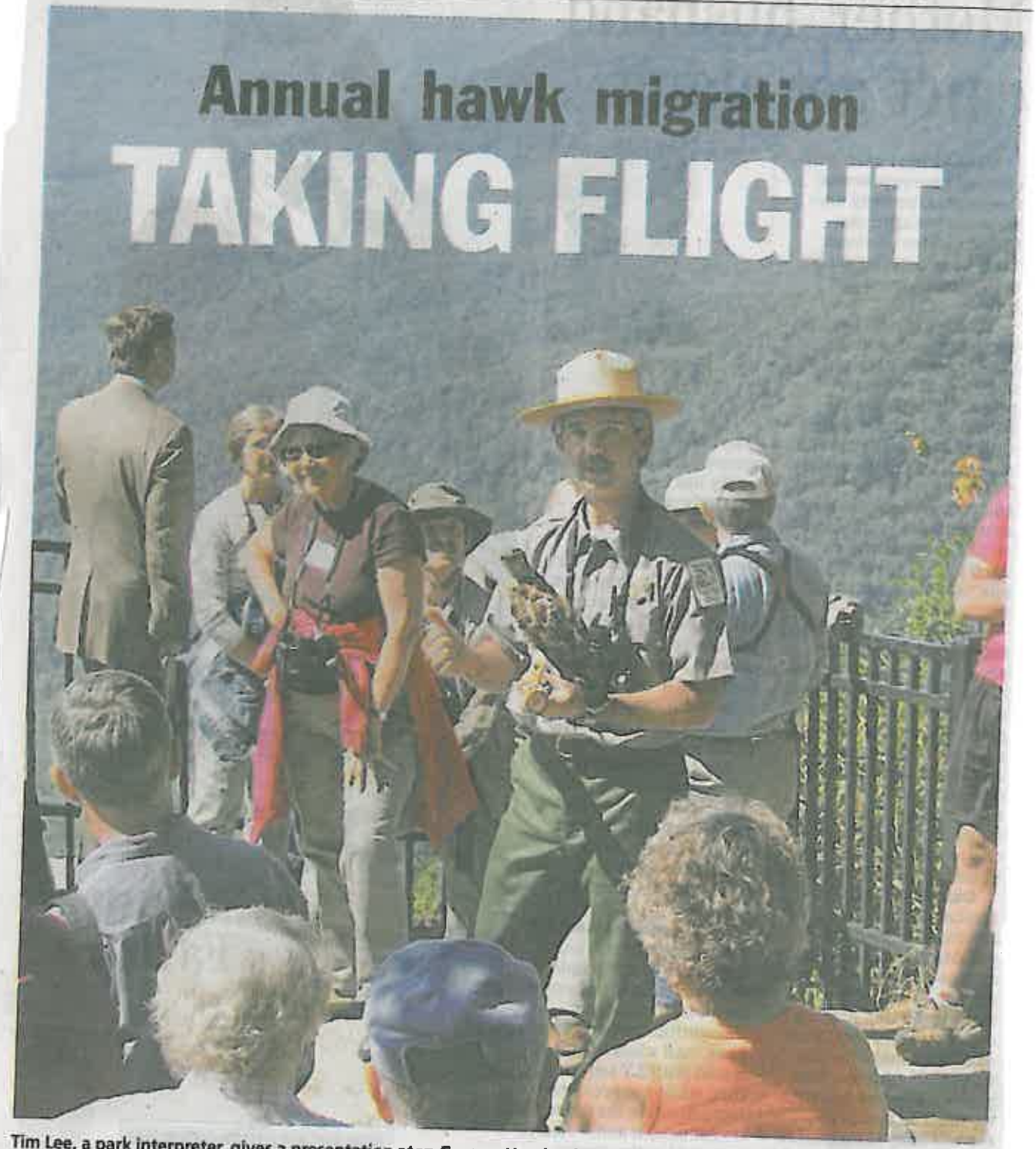
Annual hawk migration

TAKING FLIGHT



Tim Lee, a park interpreter, gives a presentation atop Caesars Head as hawk watchers wait to see raptors flying overhead. MIKE FOLEY/STAFF

Early birds already moving at northern count locations

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Although we're still at least three weeks away from what is usually the height of the annual hawk migration in South Carolina, in other parts of the country the raptors are already on the move.

At HawkCount.com, where daily tallies are registered in locations across the United States, spotters in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Maryland, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Virginia and even Texas are showing a number of the large birds on the move from northern climes toward their winter homes in Central and South America.

In Corpus Christi, Texas, 732 hawks — primarily Mississippi Kites — were spotted Monday. At northern locations, the numbers were less grand. The most active location was the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Kempton, Pa., which showed 97 hawks Monday. That location had a wide assortment of birds including 32 broad-wing hawks, 26 American kestrels, 16 bald eagles and 15 osprey among a sprinkling of others.

Although hawk watching at Caesars Head, South Carolina's busiest spot, won't begin in earnest until mid-September, exactly when they'll arrive and how many is always a guessing game. Jeff Catlin, a Marietta resident, and one of the primary spotters at Caesars Head for the past 15 years, said last year was bleak.

"It was awful," he said about the 2,113 hawks spotted in September and October. "Primarily, the low count was just here at Caesars Head. Other locations were about normal."

Quite often during peal years and on peak days, 2,000 birds can fly over Caesars Head in a spectacular one-hour period.

"It's so weather-dependent," Catlin said. "But on a clear day, you'll get them mostly in the late afternoon."

Catlin said his first or second day ever up at the 3,266-foot lookout on top of Caesars Head was his best.

"There were 4,000 or 5,000 that day," he said. "I've tried to describe to people what that looks like, but it's hard. The best I can do is say it looks like somebody carrying a big peg board.

"We had one lady looking through her binoculars and every time she'd count 100 she'd hold up a finger. Eventually, she ran out of fingers."

Some of the birds flying over the mountains catch an updraft and keep on going. Others wait on the heat of the thermals and circle up and up until they're thousands of feet high before veering off.

While last year's count was low, only two years prior was one of the best years ever, with 14,289 hawks counted in 2008.

The peak bird count day traditionally is around Sept. 20-21, Catlin said, give or take two or three days. That week usually finds at least some birds moving through the area, and sometimes bird watchers find 200 or 300 at once, circling round, waiting on thermals for that boost south.

While the vast majority of the hawk count consists of broad-winged hawks, other species are also observed and noted, including bald eagles, ospreys, sharp-shinned hawks, Cooper's hawks, American kestrels and black vultures.

Some local residents, ravens, are found as well as other fall migrants such as warblers, hummingbirds, red-headed woodpeckers and blue jays.

The entire hawk watch period actually runs from Sept. 1 to Nov. 30.