



A SHORT HISTORY OF THE GGRO

In the early 1970s, Dr. Laurence Binford, ornithologist at the California Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park, noticed large numbers of raptors flying past his office window. His subsequent search for a concentration point led him to the spot we now call Hawk Hill (historically “Pt. Diablo”) – the first known raptor migration site in western North America. In 1979, Dr. Binford published a compilation of the raptor numbers that he and others had collected over 260 hours from 1972 through 1977, bringing the Marin Headlands site to the national attention of scientists and birders.



Inspired by Binford’s pioneering work, National Park Service (NPS) ecologist Judd Howell cooperated with long-time bander and falconer Will Shor in 1983 to explore the feasibility of establishing a raptor banding station in the Marin Headlands, part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA). With a few traps, a blind, and some volunteers, they trapped and banded enough hawks to show that the Marin Headlands would be a valuable location for long-term raptor migration study site here.

An extensive recruiting campaign in the spring of 1984 attracted 75 volunteer banders for the new GGNRA Raptor Banding Program. The San Francisco Zoological Society provided teaching expertise, as well as training space and non-releasable raptors for hands-on instruction.



In 1985, Judd challenged the volunteer banders to create their own ongoing program by forming committees to recruit, train, and schedule new volunteers. With help from the volunteers and Zoo Society staff, Judd and Golden Gate National Park Conservancy director Greg Moore cobbled together a successful grant proposal for the San Francisco Foundation. With three years of start-up funding, the Conservancy hired Allen Fish to direct the GGNRA banding program, a name that soon morphed into “Golden Gate Raptor Observatory”



Allen and retired high school teacher Carter Faust organized the first GGRO Hawkwatch in 1986, modeling it on the season-long hawk counting effort that Carter had been conducting since 1982. In 1988, GGRO staff and volunteers developed a more repeatable method of counting hawks tailored to the unique conditions at Hawk Hill. This “Quadrant system” would emphasize consistency of the counts from day to day, and year to year.

Also in 1986, a small group of volunteers produced the GGRO's first newsletter, the Pacific Raptor Report. Our 29th issue was published in summer 2008. In addition, we publish an annual GGRO Season Summary every January to quickly report on the just-completed migration season. The GGRO also has an in-house monthly newsletter, The Raptor Passage, reserved for volunteers and for Park staff.

A group of irrepressible and highly curious GGRO volunteers formed a Radiotelemetry Team in 1990 to study hawk movements and habitat relationships more precisely than through band recoveries. Through 2008, the radiotrackers had studied more than 50 hawks of five species, including the first Broad-winged Hawk tracked in the West.

In 1991, the Parks Conservancy hired Buzz Hull as the GGRO's first Research Director, providing critical support to improve the GGRO's record-keeping, research agenda, volunteer coordination, and animal care. Buzz also took on primary responsibility for managing all aspects of the Banding Program.

In 1992, Allen and Buzz launched the GGRO's Docent Program to accommodate the skyrocketing public interest in the migration. Docents offer HawkTalks and Banding Demonstrations every weekend day in September and October on Hawk Hill. Docents are drawn from the ranks of banders and hawkwatchers, who then share from their own field experiences with raptors.

In addition, GGRO has been fortunate to have the assistance of more than 60 seasonal Research Interns since 1986. A few of our interns have gone on to earn their PhD's in biology, and many are still working in the ecological field.

Currently, more than 250 volunteers are engaged in the various activities of the GGRO. In 2008, volunteers donated nearly 50,000 hours of work to the GGRO. Hawkwatchers made more than 23,000 hawk-sightings; banders banded more than 1500 hawks; telemetrists tracked two Red-tailed Hawks for a week; and an estimated 10,000 people came up to Hawk Hill to see the fall migration.

The annual results of our raptor research and monitoring are sent to a variety of state, federal, and private wildlife agencies. Since 1985, our staff and volunteers have developed and delivered more than 75 scientific publications and presentations on our work, both here and abroad.

Since 1983, we have enjoyed immense support from our parent organizations, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the National Park Service, specifically, the staff of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Thanks to the leaders of both organizations, and our impassioned and hard-working volunteers, the GGRO has evolved over a quarter century into an internationally recognized model of community engagement in conservation biology.