

Great Lakes Getaway

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Buzzard buffs take flight

John Snyder



Binoculars trained on the horizon, anxious bird watchers and curious on-lookers vie to be the first to catch a glimpse of the flock.

Suddenly, these winged harbingers of spring appear, as they have for countless years.

The expectant cry rings out, "They're back!"...the Buzzards of Hinckley, Ohio, that is.

The uncanny clock-like return of a flock of buzzards to Hinckley Ridge each March 15 has been the stuff of legend roundabout northeast Ohio for more than 150 years. More recently, the fame of the Hinckley Buzzards has soared to the extent that the locals compare their arrival to that of the Swallows of Capistrano. (I am not making this up.)

Few other than local historians paid much attention to the return of these birds--also known as turkey vultures--until 1957, when Robert Bordner, a Cleveland Press writer, became intrigued by the curious claim.

Hinckley habitue Walter Nowalencie told the reporter that he had personally observed the buzzards' arrival each March 15. And furthermore, Nowalencie said, his late friend Charlie Willard had kept a personal log of the vulture visits that stretched back some 23 years.

The reporter's interest was aroused. On Feb. 15, 1957, he wrote and printed the longtime legend of the Hinckley Buzzards. He further predicted their return in exactly one month--March 15.

Excitement mounted as the month progressed. Naturalists, ornithologists and reporters repeated and embellished the original story--and the suspense grew.

March 15 arrived and so did the buzzards, right on schedule. News traveled fast and the following weekend brought throngs of media and sightseers from Ohio and surrounding states.

Tiny Hinckley was unprepared for the 9000-plus visitors who flocked in to participate in one of the biggest bird walks in history. By mid-morning, every food and drink establishment in and around Hinckley had its supplies depleted. Kids fell in icy park creeks and grown-ups slogged through ankle-deep mud. There was no place in town to eat, clean up or get warm. The hospitable community of

Hinckley was dazed by the volume of people and embarrassed "to be caught with its manners down," town merchants recall. Plans to prevent a recurrence began almost immediately.

Hinckley Chamber of Commerce members teamed up to make arrangements for a pancake and sausage breakfast on the first Sunday after March 15. This day was forever more declared, "Buzzard Day."

Since that first breakfast, the Chamber has served untold thousands of buzzard buffs at the Hinckley Elementary School on Center Road (State Route 303). Meals are \$3.75 for adults and \$2 for children under 12. Hours are 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.

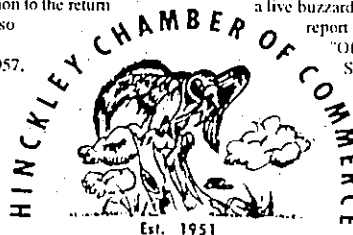
This year's 33rd annual Buzzard Day celebration on March 17 includes a live buzzard exhibit and a report from Hinckley's "Official Buzzard Spotter," who will give the exact time the birds were sighted on March 15. The Chamber will sell its coveted t-shirts, decals, patches and post cards featuring Hinckley's official buzzard logo designed by cartoonist Al Capp of Little Abner fame.

So why do the buzzard return to Hinckley? Theories are plentiful.

Some believe that the buzzards were first attracted to the area by the tons of butchered refuse and unwanted game left behind from the "Great Hinckley Varmint Hunt" of 1815. At that unenlightened time, men and boys lined up along Hinckley Township's 25 square mile perimeter and began moving inward, in a drive to rid the area of what were characterized as predatory animals destroying local farm stock.

Others point to an old manuscript account by William Cogwell, one of the first settlers to reach the area in 1810, who makes several references to "cultures of the air." The finding of this manuscript may indicate that the buzzards were making their home in Hinckley before 1810, so the "why Hinckley" question remains up in the air, so to speak.

If you're inclined to take flight to Buzzard Day, know that Hinckley is located in northeast Ohio, on State Route 3, between Cleveland and Akron. Call 216-225-4011 for more information from the official "Buzzard Hotline."



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