

# Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey



## National Conservation Area

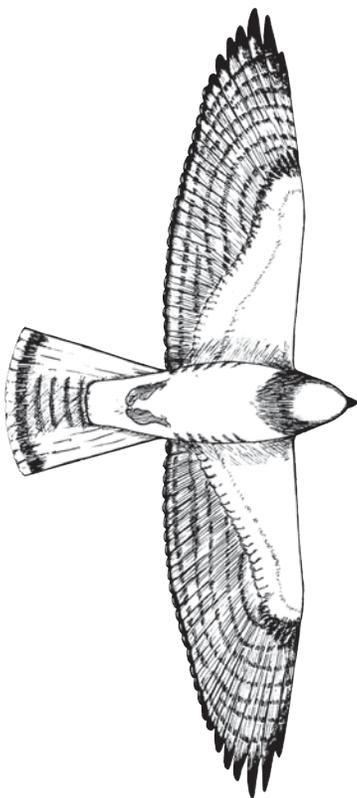
### Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*)

#### Description/Size

Wing span: 48-54 inches

Length: 17-22 inches

Weight: 1.5-2.5 pounds



Our most slender buteo; relatively long tail, long tapered pointed wings which reach or barely exceed the tip of the tail when perched; note diagnostic pale underwing linings contrasting with dark flight feathers. The only North American buteo with a true full continuum of plumage colors making morph categories convenient but somewhat arbitrary. The morphs are based primarily on coloration of underparts (light, dark, and rufous) with the light morph considered most common. Three age classes can generally be distinguished in the field: juveniles, subadults, and adults. Subadults have similar plumage to juveniles but can be distinguished during late summer/fall by a mixture of fresh and worn flight feathers, and frequently show a much paler, often whitish, head. Sexes generally similar in appearance, but females larger than males and more often dark. Juveniles have similar underwing pattern as adult of same morph. Bill is slate to black, becoming dull blue or pale olive buff at corner of mouth. Cere and mouth-lining pale greenish yellow to yellow. Eyes are dark brown in adults, gray or blue gray in juveniles. Legs and feet vary from yellow to creamy to pale grayish green. No subspecies are recognized.

#### Similar Species

Superficially similar to the other buteos, however the Swainson's hawk generally has diagnostic pale underwing linings contrasting with dark primaries and secondaries. The other species usually show an underwing pattern reverse to this. Short-tailed hawk lacks dark breast-band, and its primaries have whitish bases. White-tailed hawk lacks dark breast-band and has whitish tail with bold black subterminal band and white uppertail-coverts. Adult broad-winged hawk has broad black and white bands on tail; at all ages broad-winged hawks have an entirely pale underwing or dark wing-linings contrasting with light-colored primaries and secondaries (the reverse of Swainson's), and dark undertail-coverts.

#### Habitat/Range

Summers in the western half of North America. "Winters" during the southern hemisphere's summer on the open pampas (grasslands) of South America in Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and southern Brazil. Small populations winter in southeastern Florida and along the Texas coast, probably having failed to find the way south around the Gulf of Mexico. Inhabits open and semi-open country: deserts, grasslands, prairies, sparse shrublands and farmlands. Primarily nests in trees but will also use shrubs such as big sagebrush and those along riparian areas. Rarely will nest on the ground. Generally found in scattered trees, around shelterbelts, farmyards, riparian tree lines. Favors wild prairies, hayfields, and pastures over agricultural fields. Breeding distribution is tied closely to the distribution of various small mammals. In many parts of its range today, has adapted well to foraging in agricultural areas (e.g., wheat and alfalfa), but cannot forage in most perennial crops or in annual crops that grow much higher than native grasses, making prey more difficult to find. In the La Pampa region of Argentina, it is typically found where alfalfa is grazed by cattle and where sunflowers and corn are abundant. At night, it perches in eucalyptus groves planted as shelterbelts around farms.

## Food/Diet

Largely insectivorous except when nesting. Diet of nonbreeders in North and South America is dominated by insects such as grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, moths, butterflies and locusts. On wintering grounds, apparently eats exclusively insects found abundantly in alfalfa fields and crops such as sunflowers and corn. It is an opportunistic feeder and responds quickly to local concentrations of food. In Argentina, immature birds feed on flocks of migratory dragonflies, nomadically following the hordes of insects and feeding mostly on the wing. The diet of breeding birds has only a small portion of insects. Nestlings must obtain the moisture they need from the prey that their parents bring to the nest. This may be why the adults switch from insect to vertebrate prey for their young. Small mammals such as ground squirrels and cottontails form the bulk of the nestlings' diet but it also includes mice, small birds, reptiles and amphibians. There is some evidence that road-killed birds and animals are consumed year round. Food-caching not reported.

## Voice

Adults reported to give 3 different calls. The alarm call is commonly given by both sexes; described as a shrill, rather plaintive, *kreeeee*. The agonistic pursuit call is given during boundary disputes – a repeated *pi-tick pi-tick*. The solicitation call is a soft *weeeeee* given during copulation, presumably by female. Outside breeding season, the Swainson's Hawk is a rather silent species.

## Behavior

Often hunts from perches or while walking along the ground and may hunt in teams. Catches flying insects in midair with talons and eats them in flight. Follows tractors or stays close to prairie fires in search of disturbed or fleeing prey. Can walk easily and run expertly; several accounts describe them pouncing at and running down insects. May attempt to flush prey by jumping and leaping on ground while simultaneously flapping wings. May catch prey on ground using either beak or talons. Flies with strong

moderately deep wing-beats. Soars in a shallow dihedral or "V" and teeters in flight a little like a turkey vulture. Will hover or "kite" (hang motionless in air) when foraging, especially in moderate to strong winds, but hovering is shorter and less frequent than those of white-tailed kite or rough-legged hawk. Occasionally courses low over the ground. Commonly perches on the ground both during migration and on the breeding grounds. Most gregarious of North American raptors. Gathers in groups for feeding and migrating, motivated by good conditions, not social interaction. During breeding season, non-breeders may form flocks of 100+ birds that forage together and use communal nocturnal roosts. Breeding pairs are usually monogamous and defend nest area, but frequently forage with other individuals near or away from active nests, usually in response to farming activities. The Swainson's hawk is the second longest long distant migrant of any North American raptor (the Arctic peregrine falcon is first).

Nearly the entire population migrates annually between breeding areas in North America and "wintering" grounds in South America, a round-trip that can be as long as 14,000 miles. Each migration can last at least two months. Hawks leave North America from August to October and head south toward Central America where virtually the entire population funnels through the Isthmus of Panama creating a "river of hawks" during a brief, concentrated period (roughly 2 weeks) along with migrating flocks of broad-winged hawks, turkey vultures, and Mississippi kites. Nearly 350,000 Swainson's hawks have been counted passing over a single point in Panama City in October and November. Once into South America, they cross the Andes in Colombia and travel along the eastern foothills, south through Brazil and Bolivia to Argentina. Earliest band recovery in Argentina was 10 Nov. The return trip north begins in late Feb to mid March with birds reaching



Raptor Information Sheet - Swainson's Hawk

southern U.S. by late March/early April, and Canada by late April/mid May. Generally migrate in flocks that can be as large as 5,000 to 10,000 individuals, always during daylight, typically soaring in thermals, and rarely over water.

## Reproduction/Nesting

Clutch size: 2-3 eggs  
Eggs: elliptical, 2.24 x 1.7 inches, white some lightly blotched with reddish brown around larger end.  
Incubation: 34-35 days  
Fledge: 38-46 days  
Disperse: 22-38 days

Most birds apparently do not breed until they are at least 3 years old. Monogamous – for at least the breeding season. Strong sense of nest fidelity. Individuals often use same nest or nest tree in successive breeding seasons or move only short distances within same territory. Nest is made of sticks and usually placed low in solitary tree, shrub, or small grove or line of trees along streams. Occasionally a pair will nest on the ground or on a bank or ledge. Nests are either new, refurbished old, or an old raven, crow or magpie nest. Nest appears more flimsy or ragged than that of other buteos. High nestling mortality often occurs when young are 15 to 30 days old and may be due to fratricide. Does not lay replacement clutches. Swainson's hawks, red-tailed hawks and ferruginous hawks compete for territory and defend territories against each other. These three species nest in the same general area and exploit much the same prey base. Although diets overlap greatly, habitats may not. Swainson's hawk reproductive success may be reduced as a result of nesting near these two other buteos.

## Life Span

Longest recorded – 24 years 1 months

## Conservation Status

Not on the US Fish and Wildlife's Endangered or Threatened Species List. However it is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Idaho Fish & Game lists the Swainson's hawk as a protected non game species for which it is illegal to collect, harm or otherwise remove from its natural habitat. The BLM considers this a Watch List species in Idaho – current population or habitat information suggests that this species may warrant sensitive species status in the future. In many parts of its range, this hawk has adjusted to agricultural landscapes. Nonetheless, its numbers have declined significantly in parts of the western United States, often due to habitat loss or incompatible agricultural practices which reduce populations of major seasonal foods such as ground squirrels and grasshoppers. Illegal shooting, lack of suitable nest trees, and changing land uses also are impacting this species. In South America, poisoning by insecticides used to control grasshopper outbreaks in alfalfa and sunflower fields caused the death of thousands of these hawks in the late 1990s. While the pesticide responsible for these deaths was banned, other pesticides have replaced it. The effects of these pesticides are unknown at this time (2010). Other threats include conversion of native habitat to woody perennial crops and urban development, and shooting.

## Viewing in the NCA

The Swainson's hawk is seen in the NCA from April through July.

## Interesting Facts

Spanish name:  
*Aguilucho langostero*,  
*Gavilán longostero*,  
*Aguililla de Swainson*

- The scientific name comes from the Latin word *buteo* meaning buzzard, an early name for hawks and vultures, and *swainsoni* - named after William Swainson, an English naturalist.
- Its habit of gorging on outbreaks of crickets and grasshoppers has earned it the popular name "Grasshopper Hawk."
- Other names: Black Hawk, and Brown Hawk.
- Pellet analysis has shown that a single hawk can consume an average of 100 grasshoppers each day.

## Sources

[AXIA CD ROM](#) - Know Your Birds of Prey  
[Bird Banding Lab](#) - [www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/homepage/long3120.cfm](http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/homepage/long3120.cfm)  
[Idaho Fish&Game](#) - <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/wildlife/nongame/birds/birdspecies.cfm>  
[National Audubon Society](#) - The Sibley Guide to Birds  
[The Peregrine Fund](#) - [www.peregrinefund.org/Explore\\_Raptors/hawks/swainson.htm](http://www.peregrinefund.org/Explore_Raptors/hawks/swainson.htm)  
[Birds of North America Online](#) - <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/265>  
[US BLM](#) – <http://www.blm.gov/id/st/en/prog/wildlife.html> - sensitive species list  
[USFWS](#) - [http://ecos.fws.gov/tess\\_public/pub/listedAnimals.jsp](http://ecos.fws.gov/tess_public/pub/listedAnimals.jsp)  
and [www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/regulationspolicies/mbta/mbtintro.html](http://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/regulationspolicies/mbta/mbtintro.html)

Artwork - courtesy of Alberta Sustainable Resource Development  
Map - The Peregrine Fund

**Swainson's Hawk**  
*(Buteo swainsoni)*



Adult



Immature

