

Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey



National Conservation Area

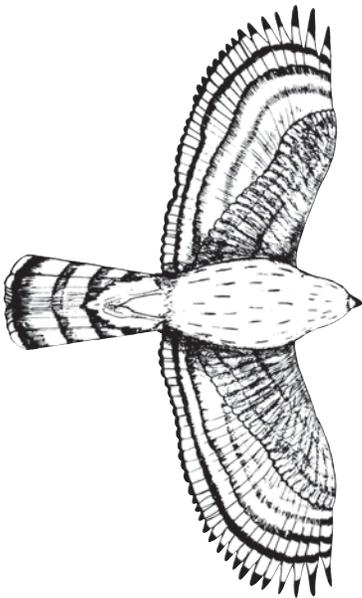
Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)

Description/Size

Wing span: 38-45 inches

Length: 20-25 inches

Weight: 1.5-3 pounds



A large forest hawk with long broad wings and a long broad tail that is held closed unless soaring which provides for speed and maneuverability in dense forests. Dark gray above with a light gray chest and belly heavily streaked with black and darker grays. Crown of head and patch behind eye is dark gray. Distinctive white eyebrow. Wings are lightly barred. Underwings are two-toned: coverts white with dark gray barring contrast with dark flight feathers lightly barred. The long straight tail is dark gray above crossed by 3–5 broad, blackish bands and paler gray below weakly barred by 4 bands; rounded tail tip may have thin white terminal band (reduced or absent with wear). Feet, cere, toes, legs, and mouth-lining yellow. Eye red. Bill black at tip; gray at base. Talons black. Female similar to male but with coarser barring below; up to 25 percent larger. Immatures are brown above with heavy vertical streaking with brown and white on chest and belly; wings and tails are more strongly barred than adults. Bill is gray. Cere, gape, feet and legs are greenish to yellow. Iris initially greenish gray turning to orange to red by third year. No morphs. Ten subspecies recognized including two in North America. *A.g. atricapillus* occurs throughout the continent except the Queen Charlotte Islands and Vancouver Island off British Columbia where *A.g. laingi* occurs.

Similar Species

Cooper's hawk and Sharp-shinned hawk – smaller accipiters. Gyr Falcon – more severely tapered wings and stoops on prey from above.

Habitat/Range

Favors forest edges and open woodlands in boreal and temperate forests of the northern hemisphere.

In North America, it breeds from Alaska to Newfoundland and south. Nests in most forest types found throughout its range; sea level to alpine.

Forest stands containing nests are often small, approximately 25-245 acres; territories may contain 1–5 alternative nest sites. Free water is often present near nests but is not a habitat requirement. Forest openings may increase nest access, serve as travel corridors, support open-country prey, or reduce flight barriers to fledglings. Hunts in diverse habitats ranging from open-sage steppes to dense forests, including riparian areas. Winter habitat - prefers mature forests and edge habitats where prey is abundant.



Food/Diet

Opportunistic powerful hunter capable of killing a variety of prey depending on region, season, vulnerability and availability. Main foods include ground and tree squirrels, snowshoe hares, rabbits, grouse, ptarmigan, woodpeckers, jays and songbirds. Other prey includes domestic cats and fowl, and game birds. Occasionally eats reptiles and insects. In northern regions competes for prey with gyrfalcons. Can kill prey up to 2 times their own mass though most prey weigh 0.5 to 1 pound.

Voice

Usually silent except during the breeding season. Mates likely communicate mainly by calling because of the poor visibility in their forest habitats. May also vocalize when chasing prey. When alarmed, either sex utters *ki-ki-ki-ki* in a rapid series of about 10–20 calls. Both sexes utter a short plaintive wail call (*kree-ah*). Calls are irregular but frequent, and are single rather than in sequence. Functions of wail calls (3 variants-recognition wail, food-transfer call, dismissal wail) appear to differ according to context. Male also gives a *kek* single-note call as he enters the nest stand with prey.



Behavior

Flight pattern typical of the genus; several rapid flaps followed by a glide, although wing beats are slower, deeper, and more direct than those of the other North American accipiters. Soars occasionally during migration and during courtship. Highly agile when chasing prey. Since female is much larger than male, she handles most of maintaining breeding territory, care of the young and nest defense. Smaller male does much of the hunting and bringing food to the female at the nest. Goshawks are well adapted for hunting in forests but also hunt open habitats. They are short duration sit-and-wait predators, perching briefly while searching for prey before changing perches. Their short, powerful wings allow rapid acceleration and their long tails quick maneuverability in trees. Grasps prey with its powerful talons; usually kills prey on impact or repeatedly grasping prey until it finds vital organs. Occasionally hunt by flying rapidly along forest edges, across openings, and through dense vegetation to surprise prey; also attack prey in flight. May stalk prey on foot, using vegetation and topography for concealment or may capture prey through dogged persistence. If undetected by prey, the hawk's attack may consist of a smooth, silent, accelerating glide that ends in a capture strike without a wing beat. If spotted by prey, the hawk rapidly pumps its wings to close in on the intended quarry. Readily crashes through shrubs and vegetation or will enter water when chasing prey; reckless nature when hunting is legendary among falconers. Prey is carried to a traditional plucking perch, where it is plucked and torn apart. Plucking posts are often within 160 feet of the nest during breeding season. Goshawks cache food when nestlings are small and need frequent feedings. This species is a partial migrant that winters throughout its breeding range including occasionally the Great Plains and southeastern states; some individuals undergo short movements to lower elevations during winter, apparently in search of food. Irruptive movements of northern birds to the south occur at approximately 10-year intervals that coincide with population lows of snowshoe hare and grouse. Prey availability may primarily dictate the proportion of populations that migrate and the selection of wintering areas.

Life Span

Longest recorded – 16 years 5 months.

Viewing in the NCA

Some northern goshawks winter in the NCA from November through February. They migrate through the NCA from August through October and then again from February through May.

Reproduction/Nesting

Clutch size: 2-4 eggs
Eggs: oval, rough shell, pale bluish-white without markings; 2.3 x 1.8 inches
Incubation: 35-38 days
Fledge: 5-6 weeks
Disperse: 5-6 weeks

During nest repair/construction, both pair members engage in Sky-Dance Display. From brief soaring flights, male dives at the female with closed wings well above the forest canopy or he initiates a direct aerial chase below tree canopy. Both birds then fly slowly about 3 feet apart, with deep, slow wingbeats, wings held in a "V". Initial flight undulations may be shallow or can consist of spectacular dives. Breeding pairs require extensive tracts of habitat compared to other hawks; from 1.2 to 5 square miles. Apparently monogamous. Males show strong attachment to traditional nesting territories. Pair members winter separately but may breed together for many years. Goshawks nest in coniferous, deciduous, or mixed-pine forests, depending on availability. They seem to prefer mature to old growth forests with high canopy closure. Nest trees are usually one of the largest trees in the nest area; most territories contain several alternative nest trees. Nest switching from year to year may reduce exposure to disease and parasites. Nest constructed of thin sticks; "bowl" lined with tree bark and greenery, placed in crotch or on limb of a large tree. Usually in lower one third of nest tree or just below the forest canopy. Replacement clutch is laid if first clutch lost. Aggressively defends its nest site and will strike large mammals, even humans, who venture too close. Some females breed at two to three years of age but males do not breed until four years old.

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 northern goshawk 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 an imperiled species in Idaho - it is experiencing significant declines in population or habitat and is in danger of regional or local extinctions in Idaho in the foreseeable future if factors contributing to its decline continue. Critical habitats and populations of sensitive species occurring on lands administered by the BLM will be managed and/or conserved to minimize the need for listing these species as threatened or endangered by either Federal or State governments in the future. Populations appear to be stable in eastern North America. Forestry practices and urbanization are contributing to declines in populations and reproduction in parts of the western U.S. Vulnerable to accidental nest disturbance as well as deliberate human interference at nest sites. Starvation and illegal shooting are leading causes of mortality. Few natural predators.

Interesting Facts

Spanish name:
Gavilán azor

- The scientific name comes from the Latin word *accipere* meaning to take or to grasp and refers to a bird of prey, and *gentilis* meaning nobility.
- Common name derived from "goose hawk" and northern refers to its northern range.
- Other names: chicken hawk,
- Has been trained for falconry for at least 2,000 years; species was favored among Oriental, Middle Eastern, and North European falconers and especially prized by Japanese falconers.
- In medieval Europe, only members of nobility could fly this hawk.
- Revered as symbol of strength. A goshawk adorned the helmet of Attila the Hun.

Sources

AXIA CD ROM - Know Your Birds of Prey
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US BLM - <http://www.blm.gov/id/st/en/prog/wildlife.html> - sensitive species list
US Fish and Wildlife Service - http://ecos.fws.gov/tess_public/pub/listedAnimals.jsp
and www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/regulationspolicies/mbta/mbtintro.html

Illustration: courtesy Alberta Sustainable Resource Development / Map: The Peregrine Fund
Photography: BLM Photo File

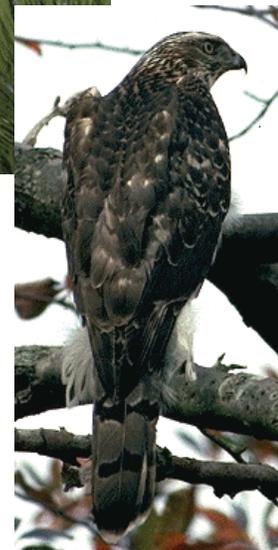
Northern Goshawk
(Accipiter gentilis)



Adult



Immature



Photos: Know Your Birds of Prey, Axia CD ROM

Raptor Information Sheet - Northern Goshawk