

Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey



National Conservation Area

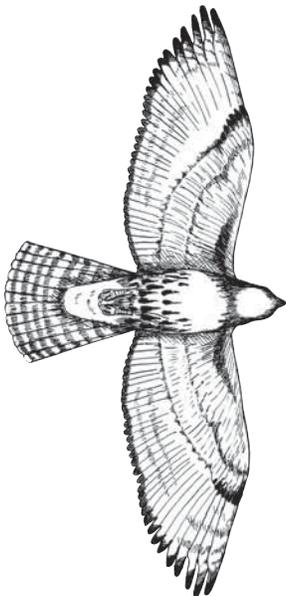
Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

Description/Size

Wing span: 42-56 inches

Length: 17-25 inches

Weight: 1.5-3.3 pounds



The red-tailed hawk (red-tail) is the most common and widespread buteo of North America. Up to 16 subspecies are recognized; similar in shape and habits; usually distinguished by ventral coloration, tail markings, and/or size, but there is no clear geographic trend in any of these characters. Not every subspecies has the distinctive red tail. Sexes similar in appearance though females are consistently larger. Red-tails have a chunky body, and broad round tipped wings. Their upperparts range from brown to black and underparts are white to black. Adults typically have a reddish tail with a narrow, dark band at the tip. The tail is sometimes streaked or spotted and often spread or fanned in flight. The beak is dark becoming lighter basally. The iris of adult is yellow in younger birds, grading to brown in older hawks. Legs and feet are yellow with dark talons. Juveniles have narrower wings and longer tails that are brownish with seven to nine dark brown bands of equal width. The Western population is the most variable population of red-tails, with a complete range from light to dark plumage. Dark and intermediate morphs account for 10-20% of Western population.

Similar Species

Depending upon age, race and color morph, the Red-tailed hawk could be mistaken for similar variants of Swainson's, Ferruginous, Rough-legged, Broad-winged, Red-shouldered and perhaps Short-tailed hawks.

Habitat/Range

Found throughout North America except the high arctic, and scattered through Central America and the West Indies. Inhabits open areas with scattered, elevated perch sites in a wide range of altitudes and habitats, including deserts, grasslands, broken coniferous and deciduous woodlands, tropical rainforests, agricultural fields and urban areas. Generally absent from large expanses of treeless terrain or dense forests.

Food/Diet

Concentrates on species that are abundant and easily caught, therefore diets differ among regions and time of year. Typically hunts small to medium sized mammals, primarily mice, ground squirrels, and jackrabbits. Birds and reptiles are also eaten and occasionally insects. Red-tails also feed on carrion when available.



Voice

Often described as a scream, resembles a long "kee-eeee-arr." Usually produced by soaring or perched birds, during territorial disputes, and occasionally in response to human intrusions. During courtship flight, a sharp, shrill *chwerk* is produced by one or both mates. Mates also utter a low, nasal *gannk* when near one another.

Behavior

Active flight is slow, ponderous and direct with deep wing beats. May soar or glide with wings in a slight "V" or broad "U". Will also kite (in strong winds stays in place aloft without flapping). Red-tails are primarily a sit-and-wait predator and generally require elevated perch sites for hunting. Will swoop down from a perch to seize prey; snatching birds while flying or pursuing prey from low level flight. Infrequently hunts while soaring, kiting, or powered flight. They also steal food from other raptors – pirating. Walks on ground using slow, awkward steps; most often exhibited while feeding on carrion.

Raptor Information Sheet - Red-tailed Hawk

Hops on ground in energetic, erratic fashion while chasing insect prey or confronting snakes. Food generally taken back to a feeding perch. Larger items are partially eaten on the ground, with the remains often brought to a perch for continued feeding. Red-tails generally migrate alone, or in small, loosely organized flocks. Most northern populations migrate south during winter. Individuals at mid-latitudes may stay on their breeding grounds but some may leave for a few weeks. Southern populations are mostly sedentary. Red-tails soar on migration and avoid long water crossings that require sustained powered flight; concentrate along shorelines, peninsulas, and similar topographic features. Timing and rate of migration influenced by weather and food supply. Often harass and are harassed by other buteos. Highly territorial during breeding season but aggression is reduced and sporadic outside breeding season

Reproduction/Nesting

Clutch size: 1-4 eggs
Eggs: white to buffy with sparse to heavy blotches of reddish-brown, 2.3 x 1.8 inches.
Incubation: 28-35 days
Fledge: 6-7 weeks
Disperse: up to 10 weeks

Nests are made of sticks and twigs. Nest sites vary depending on habitat but in general they are open from above and provide a good view of the surrounding landscape. Use tops of tall trees, cliff ledges, cactus, and man-made structures. A nest may be used for one or more years by the same pair, vacated for one or more years, and used again. Refurbishment of previously built nests includes adding new materials inside and out. Sometimes two or more nests are built or refurbished without being used in a particular year. Red-tails are extremely sensitive to disturbance during nest building and may even abandon the nest. Sexually mature at two years. Generally monogamous, the pair bond is usually maintained until death of a partner, at least in non-migratory pairs, but acquisition of a new mate can occur rapidly. Reproductive success varies with prey abundance, perch density and distribution, and proximity of nest to other red-tails.

Life Span

Longest recorded – 29 years 9 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 red-tailed hawk as a protected non game species for which it is illegal to collect, harm or otherwise remove from its natural habitat. Populations are increasing in much of North America, apparently in response to deforestation in the east and fire suppression in the west which have encouraged the establishment of a patchwork of woodlands and large open areas which are favored by red-tails. It has replaced some species of buteos that do not respond well to these management practices. Red-shouldered, Ferruginous, and Swainson's hawks are some species of concern in this regard. Availability of nest sites and food supply are the two factors most likely to limit red-tail populations. Threats to the species include automobile collisions, nest disturbance, and illegal shooting.

Viewing in the NCA

The red-tailed hawk is seen in the NCA year-round.



Interesting Facts

Spanish names:
Aguililla colirroja,
Gavilán colirrojo,
Aguililla parda

Sources

- The scientific name comes from the Latin word *buteo* meaning buzzard, an early name for hawks and vultures, and *jamaicensis*, the Latinized name for Jamaica, West Indies, where the first specimen was collected.
- Common name comes from the reddish tail that most adults have.
- Other names: Buzzard hawk, hen hawk, red hawk, and mouse hawk.

AXIA CD ROM - Know Your Birds of Prey

Bird Banding Lab - www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/homepage/long3120.cfm

Carolina Raptor Center - www.carolinaraptorcenter.org/rt_hawk.php

Hawk Mt. Sanctuary - www.hawkmountain.org/media/Redtail.pdf

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/redtail.html

Birds of North America Online - <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/052>

US Fish and Wildlife Service - http://ecos.fws.gov/tess_public/pub/listedAnimals.jsp

and www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/regulationspolicies/mbta/mbtintro.html



Illustrations - courtesy of
Alberta Sustainable Resource
Development
Map - The Peregrine Fund
Photography: David Martorelli

Red-tailed Hawk
(Buteo jamaicensis)



Adult



Immature

