



CASCADES RAPTOR CENTER

Red-tailed Hawk Overview

Introduction

The Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) is the most common Buteo hawk found throughout North America. These birds are frequently observed perched atop roadside poles or soaring gracefully over open fields. Adult Red-tailed Hawks are easily identified by their characteristic reddish-brown tails.

Flight and Behavior

Exceptional Soarers

Red-tailed Hawks utilize their broad, rounded wings to ride rising thermals, which are columns of warm air. This efficient soaring technique allows them to conserve energy as they search for food.

Diurnal – These hawks are active during daylight hours.

Aerial Courting

During courtship, Red-tailed Hawks perform impressive aerial displays. Males engage in repeated steep dives and climbs, while pairs may clasp talons in mid-air and spiral downward together in a dramatic sky dance.

Hollywood Stars

The unique, raspy, high-pitched calls of Red-tailed Hawks are often used by movie directors to represent birds of prey. These calls are frequently misapplied when eagles are shown on screen, despite differences in vocalizations.

Hunting and Defense

Formidable Hunters

Red-tailed Hawks possess exceptionally sharp eyesight—up to eight times more powerful than that of humans—which enables them to spot small mammals, such as mice, from heights of 100 feet. Despite their prowess, they are sometimes attacked or mobbed by

[Type here]

smaller birds, including Red-winged Blackbirds, American Crows, and Blue Jays, which attempt to drive hawks away from their territories.

Perch and Pounce

These hawks are primarily sit-and-wait predators, often utilizing elevated perches to scan for prey. They can fly at speeds of 20–40 mph and can reach up to 120 mph when diving. The eye color of mature adults is a soft brown iris, while juveniles have yellow irises.

Appearance and Size

Plumage Variation

Most Red-tailed Hawks have reddish-brown tail feathers, although juveniles display pale brown tails with 7–9 dark bars. The patagium, a fold of feathered skin along the wing's leading edge, is visible as a dark area on the underside of their wings. Plumage coloration can range from very light to very dark morphs, depending on the subspecies.

Size

Wingspan: 38-42 inches

Weight: 18-26 ounces (1.5–3.25 lbs)

Length: 18–26 inches

Females are typically much larger than males, which is common among raptors.

Diet

Red-tailed Hawks are opportunistic generalist predators with a varied diet consisting of mammals, reptiles, and birds. Typical prey includes mice, voles, rats, rabbits, hares, ground squirrels, snakes, lizards, birds, and carrion. Hunting strategies include perching and scanning or soaring above potential prey before diving swiftly to capture it with powerful talons.

Habitat and Distribution

Habitat

Highly adaptable, Red-tailed Hawks inhabit a wide range of environments, from open country, deserts, grasslands, and woodlands to scrublands, fields, and pastures. They are even found in Mexico's tropical rainforests. The key requirement for their habitat is open ground for hunting and elevated perches.

[Type here]

Some Red-tailed Hawks are partial migrants, breeding in regions such as Canada, Alaska, and the northern Great Plains before migrating south for the winter. Others remain in their territories year-round.

Location

These hawks are distributed across North America, from Alaska to Venezuela and as far east as the Virgin Islands. They are habitat generalists, able to thrive in diverse areas with ample land and high perches. Migration is influenced by weather, and these birds do not cross large bodies of water during migration.

Nesting and Reproduction

Red-tailed Hawks construct bulky stick nests in trees, on cliff ledges, or on buildings. Both males and females collaborate to build and refurbish these nests annually, lining them with leafy foliage, bark, or dry vegetation. Territorial males defend areas of about two square miles in rural settings, while in urban areas, hawks may nest closer together. Nest sites are sometimes taken over by Great Horned Owls when not in use.

The incubation period lasts about 28 days. The species is altricial, meaning that the young are born helpless, naked, and blind, requiring extended parental care for warmth, protection, and feeding. Nests can reach up to 6.5 feet in height and 3 feet in width, with construction typically completed in 4–7 days.

Conservation

Red-tailed Hawks depend on elevated perching structures and open land for their survival. Urbanization and deforestation pose threats to their habitat, although the species can tolerate modified landscapes with tall structures suitable for nesting and hunting. Rodent poisons are a significant hazard to these hawks. Eliminating the use of rodent poisons and installing elevated perches in hunting areas can help protect Red-tailed Hawks and reduce vehicle collisions.

Ecological Service

Red-tailed Hawks play a vital role in controlling rodent and small mammal populations, contributing to ecosystem balance.