

Red-tail Hawk

Scientific Name: *Buteo jamaicensis*

Did You Know?

- The red-tail is the largest hawk, usually weighing between 2 and 4 pounds. As with most raptors, the female is nearly 1/3 larger than the male and may have a wingspan of 56 inches. This species shows a great deal of individual variation in plumage.
- The eyesight of a hawk is 8 times as powerful as a human's.
- Like all hawks, the red-tailed hawk's talons are its main weapons.
- The Red-tailed Hawk has hoarse and rasping 2- to 3-second scream that is most commonly heard while soaring. They are loudest when defending their nest. When parents leave the nest, the young utter a loud wailing "klee-uk," repeated several times - this is a food cry.
- 85 -90% of the red-tailed hawk's diet is composed of small rodents.
- Nests are located from 35 to 75 feet high in the forks of large trees. The nest is large, flat, shallow and made of sticks and twigs about 1/2 inch in diameter. Both males and females assist in nest construction.
- When hatched, the young are covered with white down. They grow slowly and require much food, which keeps both parents busy. They remain in the nest for up to 48 days. During the last 10 days or so the young, which now appear as large as the parent birds, practice flapping their wings and balancing in the wind on the edge of the nest, preparing for the day when they will launch themselves into the air.
- The hawk's average life span in the wild is 20 years.
- The red-tailed hawk is capable of "kiting," holding still against the wind on set wings, much like a kite tugging against string. It's one of the few birds able to do so.
- The term "Buzzard," generally applied to Vultures, really applies to the red-tailed's family of Buteos, or soaring hawks. In England, a close relative is known as the "Common Buzzard."
- The red-tailed hawk was often used in the ancient sport of falconry, practiced primarily by the rich nobility.



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General Information On Red-tail Hawks

IDENTIFYING CHARACTERISTICS:

A large hawk, usually weighing between two and four pounds, this species shows a great deal of individual variation in plumage. The adult has a rufous-colored tail that may or may not have a black terminal bar. The exception to this is the Harlan's sub-species, which has a white tail mottled with black. Adults are dark brown on the back and the top of their wings. The underside of the bird is usually light with a dark belly band, and a cinnamon wash on the neck and chest. However, there are both light-colored and dark-colored races that confound this. Melanistic (dark) birds have very little light coloring and appear totally dark brown. In all of the color phases, the underside of the feathers is light-colored. Immatures resemble the adults, except that their tails are brown with dark bars; the red tail molts in during its second year.

RANGE:

The red-tailed hawk's breeding range extends from central Alaska through Canada and across the entire United States, south through Mexico and into Central America. In winter, many of the northern birds move south; however, red-tailed hawks are commonly seen as far north as Minnesota each winter.

HABITAT:

The red-tailed hawk is found around open fields, especially near woodlots close to farms and cities. Not a bird of the deep woods, it is usually found in grasslands or marsh-shrub habitats. It also found in urban areas.

NESTING:

Red-tailed hawks typically do not begin breeding until their third year. Pairs build a large stick nest near the top of a tree (usually deciduous) at the edge of open canopy woods. Two to four eggs are usually laid in April or May, hatching in about 30 days. The young remain in the vicinity of the nest until they can fly, then follow their parents as they learn to forage for themselves.

FEEDING HABITS:

Red-tailed hawks feed on a wide variety of prey. Mammals commonly make up a large part of their diet and include everything from small mice to rabbits and hares. They will also take medium-sized birds and reptiles such as lizards and snakes.

CONSERVATION STATUS:

A common hawk across its range, the red-tailed hawk has made a spectacular comeback since the days of hawk bounties.