

Red-Tailed Hawk

Buteo jamaicensis

This large, dark headed, broad-shouldered hawk is one of the most common and widespread hawks in North America. The Red-tailed hawk belongs to the genus (family) Buteo, or broad-winged soaring hawks, and are easily seen because of their habit of circling high in the air or perching in dead trees or on utility poles along roadways watching for rodents. They are found in most habitats from Alaska through Central America.



Description – Plumage: The Red-tail is a large hawk, somewhat smaller than an eagle, usually weighing between 1.5 and 4 pounds. As with most raptors, the female is larger than the male and may have a wingspan of 56 inches (4.7 feet). These buteos have a longer wingspan and shorter tail adapted for soaring flight than many of our smaller hawks that need to maneuver through forested habitats. This species shows a great deal of individual variation in plumage.

The adult Red-tailed Hawk is easily identified, for as it turns while soaring overhead, the broad, rounded tail shows a rich, russet red or orange-red color, hence the name. The tail looks pale from below, but may show the hint of red when viewed from the ground. The adult “red” tail may or may not have a black terminal bar.



Adults hawks are dark brown on the back and the top of their wings. The underside of the bird is usually light, having pale to cinnamon wash to the neck and chest feathers, with a dark band of feathers across the belly, called the bellyband. Immature hawks resemble the adults except their tail is brown with dark bars until they molts during their second year.

Plumages or feather coloration do vary considerably within the species. One of the most reliable marks is the dark patagial mark, or dark feathers along the leading edge of the bird's wing, which is present on all ages, and races of Red-tailed hawks.

Wingspan: Much variation in size leads to variation in wingspan – average 45 to 58 inches or 3.7 ft. – 4.8 feet from wing tip to wing tip.

Size – length: 17 to 26 inches or 1.4 to 2.6 feet from tip of bill to tip of tail.

Weight: Females are up to one-third larger than males. Weight ranges from 690 to 1670 grams or 24.36 to 58.9 oz or 1.5 to 3.7 lbs.

Vocalization: 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 territory. When parents leave the nest, the young utter a loud wailing "klee-uk," repeated several times - this is a food cry.

Behavior: The Red-tailed Hawk is the most widespread and familiar member of the American Buteos (large soaring hawks). Like all other buteos, it does not fly fast but soars at high altitudes using its keen eyesight to spot the slightest movement in the grass below. The Red-tailed hawk is able to soar using very little energy by catching a warm

current of rising air, called a thermal. The broad wings are structured to take advantage of these thermals for migration and foraging.

Habitat: The Red-tailed Hawk is found in habitat of mixed open grassland for hunting interspersed with woods for roosting. They are a perch and pounce predator and will hunt from an elevated perch, often along roadsides. They are usually found in grasslands or marsh-shrub habitats, but are very adaptable birds, being equally at home in deserts and forests, and at varying heights above sea level. They share ecological niches with other raptors, such as the Great Horned owl. Their diurnal habits allow them to hunt during the daytime, while the Great Horned owls hunt at night. They can live in the same areas without directly competing with each other. Many times the Great Horned owl, an earlier nester than the Red-tailed hawk, will use old, abandoned Red-tailed hawk nests for their own nesting needs.

Their territory is one and one-half to two square miles, but may be larger if food availability is decreased. Most birds in northern regions move south during the winter. Those birds in mid-latitudes remain in or near their breeding territory through much of the winter. Most movement is variable according to temperature and prey availability.

Geography – Range: The Red-tailed Hawk ranges throughout North America from central Alaska and northern Canada, and south as far as the mountains of Panama. Although not truly migratory, they do adjust seasonally to areas of the most abundant prey. In summer they breed throughout Alaska to Labrador, southward to Mexico and the Caribbean down to Panama. In winter many of the northern birds move south, to southern Canada southward. They are found in open areas with scattered elevated perches including agricultural fields, pastures, parkland, broken woodlands, meadows and scrub deserts.

The Red-tailed hawk's range has expanded and this species has become more common throughout North America in the response to the clearing of forests for agricultural use and urban growth.

Food & Hunting: The Red-tailed Hawk is a most opportunistic hunter. It relies on open fields and meadows with surrounding high perches to hunt from. Its diet is varied, but there is conclusive evidence that 85 to 90% is composed of small to medium sized rodents, including rabbits. Red-tailed hawks will also take birds up to the size of pheasants, snakes and lizards.

They spot prey from the air or high perch using exceptional vision, then dive at high speeds to capture their prey on the ground. They are also capable of hovering over the ground, particularly in strong winds.

Breeding and Nesting: Courtship bonding is accompanied by spectacular aerial displays by both males and females. Circling and soaring to great heights, they fold their wings and plummet to treetop level, repeating this display as much as five or six times. The male will approach the female from above, extending his legs and feet, and may grasp the female briefly from above or they may grasp each other's talons while spiraling toward the ground.

Mating and nest building begin in early spring, usually in March and continue through May. If the first clutch of eggs is lost, the female may lay a replacement clutch within a couple of weeks.

Nests are large structures located from 15 to 90 feet high in the forks of large trees or on cliff ledges. The nest is large, flat, shallow and made of sticks and twigs. Both males and females assist in nest construction. Nest sites may be used from year to year, if the birds have been successful in raising young from the nest in previous years.

The female usually lays 2-5 dull-white to bluish-white eggs that are marked with a variety of irregular reddish spots and splotches. Incubation takes 28-32 days and is maintained almost entirely by the female. During this period the male hunts for both of them, bringing the female food to the nest.



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 days when they will launch themselves into the air. This is the brancher stage and the young may be found outside of the nest perching on the tree branches, not yet ready to fly. Most young fledge at about 45 days. Red-tails typically do not begin breeding until their third year.

Mortality Rate: Like many of our raptors these birds have a high mortality rate in their first year, of as high as 80-85%.

Longevity Record: The banding record for the longest life of a Red-tailed hawk is 28 years and 10 months.

Conservation: In California, state and federal laws protect all raptors. Due to their adaptability to different habitats and their general tolerance of human presence, Red-tailed hawk populations are considered very stable across their range. Because of their inexperience hunting, juvenile birds may be seen eating road-killed animals and some are killed by traffic. Electrocution, poisoning, and illegal shooting are still hazards for Red-tailed hawks in California.

They should be viewed as a beneficial species to humans as they prey almost exclusively on rodents that are considered pests. They are an important part of a healthy ecosystem and should be treated with respect by humans.

Curious Facts

- Red-tailed hawks were once referred to as the "chicken hawk".
- The raspy call of the Red-tailed hawk is used in movies to represent any eagle or hawk seen soaring in open places.
- Hawks are carnivores (meat eaters) belonging in the category of birds known as raptors.
- The Red-tailed Hawk is the most common member of the buzzard hawk family.
- 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.
- 85 to 90 % of the Red-tailed Hawk's diet is composed of small rodents.
- The scientific name *Buteo jamaicensis* references the site where this species was first collected in Jamaica

