



Status: Common Summer Resident
Uncommon Winter Resident

RED-TAILED HAWK

(*Buteo jamaicensis*)

Description

Red-tails are large, stocky, broad-winged birds that vary greatly in color. Typical adult birds average 19 to 25 inches (48 to 63.5 cm) in length with wingspans approaching 4.5 feet (1.7 m). There are two color phases, a "normal" or light phase and a dark phase. Many variations exist between the light and dark phases. The red-tailed hawk exhibits more variations in color than any other hawk in North America. Even experts sometimes find it difficult to identify the species. In any color phase, the presence of a red tail, especially a brick-red one, is a good field mark for identification of this species.

Red-tails of the wooded river bottoms, in eastern South Dakota, are the easiest to identify. These birds are called the eastern race of the red-tail. An adult eastern race bird typically is brown to dark brown, with lighter brown on the head. The throat and chest are cream-colored with cinnamon to black streaking on the sides of the breast. A broad band of dark barring and streaking exists across the belly with barring on the legs. The outstretched wings are whitish, with a brown or chestnut-brown stripe on the leading edge. A dark crescent-shaped patch is on the underside of the wing. The tail usually is a beautiful brick-red from which the hawk derives its name.



On South Dakota plains there are two other color forms of red-tails, the dark plumaged western birds (*B.j. calurus*) and the pale Krider's red-tails (*B.j. krideri*). Adults and immatures of the western birds tend to have dark brown backs with dark heads. The chest and belly are rufous and heavily streaked. Wing linings are dark with lighter flight feathers. The tail is usually a characteristic dark red. Krider's red-tails are much paler than the eastern red-tail. White streaking appears with much greater consistency upon the head, back, and upper surface of the wing and the band of barring across the belly is greatly reduced. From a distance, the tail appears white, but may have a tinge of pink at its base. The Krider's form was long considered a separate species because of its light plumage.

Distribution



The red-tailed hawk is the most common and widely dispersed hawk in North America. It is found throughout South Dakota but is most numerous in the southeastern part of the state. The species can be found in the state all year.

Natural History

Red-tailed hawks frequent both open and wooded areas. Although these hawks migrate, some individuals remain in the state throughout the winter. Those birds that have migrated south return to the state in early March. Nesting occurs in South Dakota between March and June, with females usually laying 2 eggs. Most young hatch between mid-May and early June, after an incubation period of 28 days. Nests can be found in trees and on cliffs or canyon walls. Some researchers believe that red-tailed hawks mate for

life and return each year to the same location to nest. Although they will reuse nests, the birds most often build a new nest each year. Migrants begin leaving the state in early October.

Red-tailed hawks are usually seen as they perch on tree tops, telephone poles or other exposed perches with good views. They feed primarily on rodents such as mice and squirrels, but also will eat birds, insects, fish, and larger mammals such as rabbits. They will pirate prey from other hawks and are known to feed on *carrion*.

Conservation Measures

Birds of prey are protected by law. It is illegal to harm them or to disturb their nests. It is also against the law to have in your possession any artifacts from birds of prey, such as feathers, talons or preserved specimens. Injured hawks and owls should be reported to the S.D. Department of Game, Fish and Parks or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Officials will arrange for birds that can be saved to be cared for at rehabilitation centers such as the Oahe Wildlife Center in Pierre run by Dr. Virginia Trexler-Myren or the Reptile Gardens Raptor Rehabilitation Center in Rapid City. See the great horned owl fact sheet for the educational resources of these centers.

Glossary

Carrion - decaying flesh of a dead animal.

References

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SDOU, 1991. *The Birds of South Dakota*, NSU Press, Aberdeen, SD 57401.
National Geographic Society, 1987. *Birds of North America*, Mead Paper Co., New York, NY

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