



## BIRDS

Status: Common, Native Summer Resident

# ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK

(*Buteo lagopus*)

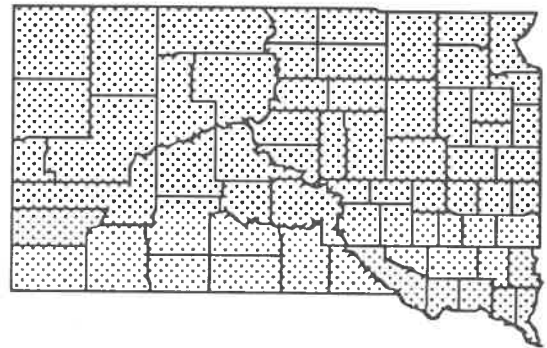
## Description

The rough-legged hawk, a common winter resident, is a large bird that frequents the frozen open country of South Dakota. The hawk averages 19 to 24 inches (48.5 to 61 cm) in length and possesses a wingspan of 4 to 4.5 feet. (1.2 to 1.4 m). Plumages on rough-legged hawks are variable, with many color phases displayed. The light phase is the most common. In its light plumage, the hawk is easily recognized in the field. The head and upper chest are pale and streaked. The belly is uniformly dark brown to black and the tail is long and white with a dark band at its base. The underside of the spread wings are pale with conspicuous black patches at each wrist.

In the uncommon dark color phase the head and body are dark brown to blackish. The dark inner wing contrasts the much lighter flight feathers when viewed in flight. In all color phases, the tail is white with a dark band at its base, and the legs are always feathered to the toes. The hawk displays many intermediate color phases between light and dark, a characteristic that is typical of most species of hawks.

## Distribution

Rough-legged hawks are common winter residents in South Dakota, most common in the southeast portion of the state. The rough-legged hawk's winter habitat



in South Dakota includes the open farmland, prairies, and surrounding plains. The hawks are uncommon winter residents in the Black Hills, preferring the more open country of the prairies and farmlands to hunt their prey. The species is absent from the state during the summer months.

## Natural History

Rough-legged hawks winter in South Dakota and breed in the Arctic and sub-arctic tundra of northern North America. They place their stick nests on cliffs or in tree tops when they are available. The clutch size for rough-legged hawks is large, between 3 to 6 eggs. Both males and females sit on the nest during the 28 day incubation period. The birds arrive in South Dakota the last of October, with the peak fall migration occurring in mid-November. The birds' spring migration to the Arctic occurs in late March, with most of the hawks leaving South Dakota in early April.

While in South Dakota, they prefer open, unwooded terrain and hunt almost exclusively on small to medium-sized mammals, chiefly mice, meadow voles, and pocket gophers. They occasionally feed on caterpillars and small birds. These hawks are most common in South Dakota when the rodent populations are high. Rough-legged, and all species of hawks, are called "birds of prey" because of their *carnivorous* nature. The rough-

legged spots prey from a perch or in flight with its acute vision, then glides rapidly to gather the prey with its talons. This species tends to select lower perches than those chosen by red-tailed hawks.

## Conservation Measures

Rough-legged hawks often are killed on highways because of their habit of feeding on traffic-killed animals. 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 see that birds that can be saved will be cared for at rehabilitation centers such as the Oahe Wildlife Center in Pierre run by Dr. Virginia Trexler-Myren (605-224-2984) or the Reptile Gardens Raptor Rehabilitation Center in Rapid City (605-342-5873).

## Glossary

**Carnivorous** - meat-eating.

## References

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