



WILDLIFE NOTES

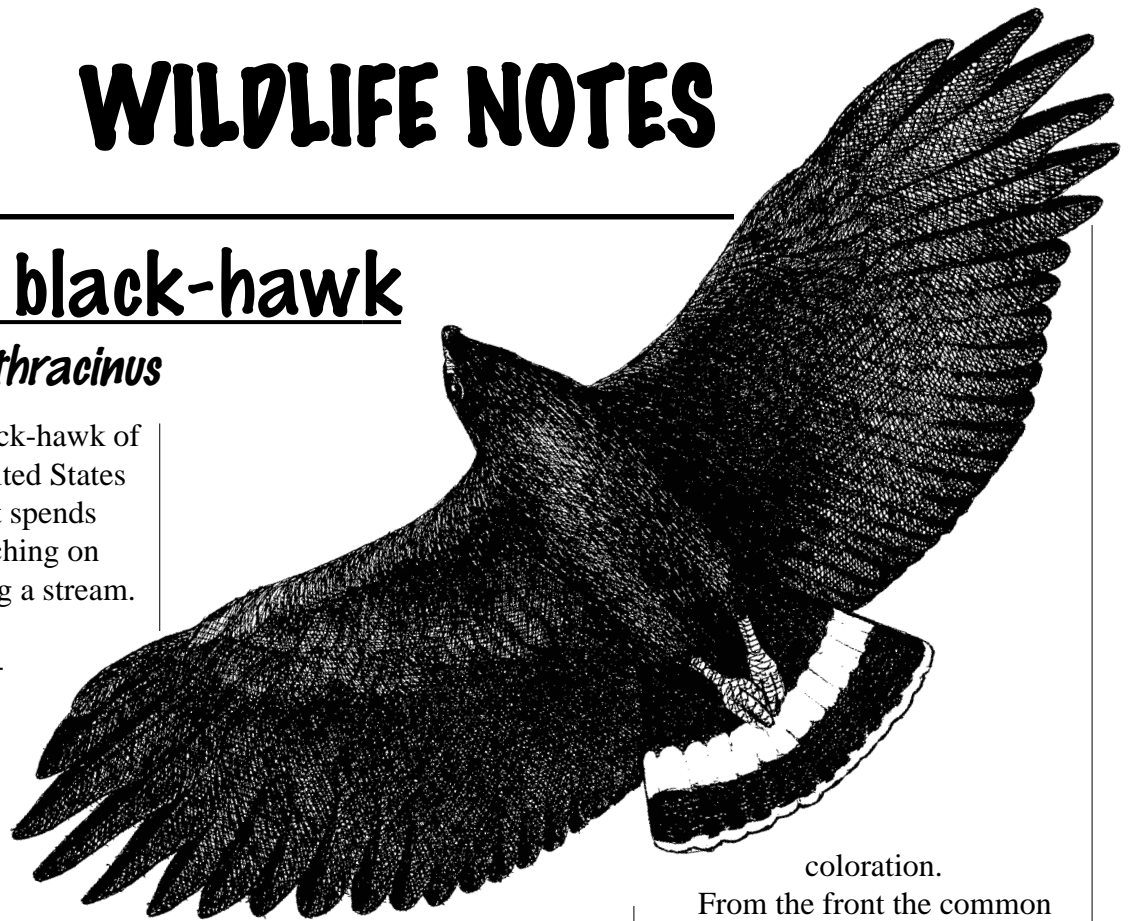
Common black-hawk

Buteogallus anthracinus

The common black-hawk of the southwestern United States seems unhurried as it spends much of its time perching on branches overhanging a stream. It may appear to be sedentary when compared to other birds of prey, as it seems to idle away the day resting in the shade of a tree. In reality, this hawk is busy making a living in harsh arid regions of the Southwest. Cloaked by the undergrowth of trees, this hawk positions itself for hunting and is acutely aware of all sound and motion. It waits in quiet stealth while locating its potential prey. Then, in a deliberate and abrupt move, it dives downward for the kill.

DESCRIPTION

The common black-hawk looks rugged with a stocky body size and short, very broad wings. Although it may be similar in size, shape, or color to raptors of the genus *Buteo*, such as the zone-tailed hawk and the red-tailed hawk, the common black-hawk has a genus of its own, *Buteogallus*.



This medium-sized hawk averages 21" in length, with an average wingspan of 46". Like most other raptor species, it is sexually dimorphic, with females being larger than males.

True to its name, the common black-hawk is mostly coal black in color, with an all black head and body. There are light patches at the outer ends of its black wings, but these are not easy to see. Its eyes are dark brown, while the legs, beak, cere (the area above the beak), and facial skin are all a drab yellow. Perhaps its best identifying feature is its tail. A wide band of white feathers shows conspicuously across the base of its black tail, with a thin strip of white feathers at the tip. Males and females have the same

coloration.

From the front the common black-hawk appears entirely dark. Its coloration helps it stay well hidden as it roosts in the shadow of trees above a desert stream. Thus the hawk is camouflaged from both its predators and its prey.

GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The common black-hawk is typically non-migratory and wide-spread throughout coastal wetlands and riparian areas in Mexico, Central America and northern South America, reaching into Paraguay, Guyana and Peru. Inhabitants can also be found in Cuba. In the United States, it is considered an uncommon summer resident of the southwest, usually migrating to Mexico in winter. Scattered populations

of the black-hawk occur in a number of undisturbed riparian corridors and wetlands in New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and southern Texas.

In New Mexico, it is normally a resident from March to October. This hawk is regularly present in the lower elevations of the Gila, San Francisco, and Mimbres drainages. In recent years it has expanded its range to undisturbed sections of the Rio Grande, Pecos, and Canadian drainages.

HABITAT

Although a variety of habitats are suitable for the common black-hawk, they must be coupled with a water source. Coastal areas, woodland marshes, lowland rainforests, mountain streams, and permanent desert streams all provide potential habitat for this bird of prey. In the southwestern states, it is most often found in mature deciduous woodlands, primarily cottonwood, along permanent lowland streams.

Large mature trees are necessary for perching and nesting, while the adjacent flowing water provides habitat for its primary prey. Main prey items for the black-hawk include fish, snakes, frogs, salamanders, small mammals and sometimes birds. It has been known to consume insects and crayfish. Some biologists claim this raptor will consume just about anything that is not poisonous. In many coastal areas, south of the United States, black-hawk populations exist almost exclusively on land crabs.

BEHAVIOR

The common black-hawk does most of its hunting from an

overhanging branch. This hawk will also move up and down a stream, along the water's edge, and wade into shallow areas in search of a bite to eat.

The black-hawk seems to keep a low profile. It seldom soars, except during the breeding season. During breeding it may be witnessed high over the terrain performing its mating ritual or circling along side of its mate. The black-hawk may prefer remote areas for nesting, given that it has abandoned former nesting areas disturbed by humans.

A medium-sized nest of sticks is built high above ground at the base of a large branch. A nest is often used year after year. The female usually lays two eggs each season. Nestlings are normally ready to fledge when they are between 43 and 50 days old, but can remain dependent on their parents for up to two additional months.

CURRENT STATUS

Common black-hawk populations in Central and South America appear to be stable. In North America only a fragment of our historic riparian areas remain and black-hawks have declined within this habitat. Furthermore, the species shows signs of having a low reproductive rate. In New Mexico this hawk has disappeared altogether where its habitat has been impaired or lost.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

The greatest threats facing the common black-hawk in the Southwest are loss of perennial streams and loss of riparian woodland habitats, particularly

the cottonwood bosque. Several factors contribute to this loss, including human encroachment and development, lack of tree regeneration due to overgrazing, and reduced stream flows due to water diversions. Additional hazards include human disturbance during nesting season, illegal shooting, undue mining waste disposal and chemical pollution.

CONSERVATION

The common black-hawk is a riparian species. Its survival depends on the preservation of healthy riparian woodland habitat. In particular, the protection or restoration of its prime habitat in the Gila, Mimbres, and San Francisco basins would greatly benefit the black-hawk of New Mexico.

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