



# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Red-tailed Hawk

The Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) is a member of the Buteo group of raptors, which are heavy-bodied, soaring birds with broad wings and broad tails. These beautiful birds are North America's most common hawk.

### RANGE

The Red-tailed Hawk is widely distributed. It breeds from Canada and Alaska to Central America and the West Indies and winters from southern Canada throughout the remainder of the breeding range. Most are year-round occupants, but they do adjust seasonally to areas of the most abundant prey. To escape harsh winters, Red-tails of the far north may be short-distance migrants to warmer areas.

### HABITAT

Red-tails may be found in most areas except unbroken forest and the high arctic, but they prefer open country interspersed with patches of trees or other elevated perches. Mixed forest and field, desert areas



with high bluffs, grasslands or agricultural areas surrounded by patchy woodlands, and rural roadsides with lines of utility poles host numerous Red-tails.

### DESCRIPTION

In New Mexico, any solitary broad-winged hawk seen in open country or patchy woodland might be considered a Red-tail until proven otherwise. The problem is that their plumage shows much variation, especially in the West. There are dark, light and reddish forms. Although they are named for their brick-colored tails, this will only show up in hawks that are two or more years old.

However, at least one of three distinctive features can be seen on a adult Red-tail: a cream or whitish underside with brown streaks forming a "belly band"; a pale mottling on the darker back which forms a light "V" in the shoulder (scapular) area, and the russet color of the top of the tail, usually seen as the bird banks in flight.

Red-tailed Hawk plumage ranges from light auburn to deep brown above. The chest and throat are creamy with some brown streaking. The tail may have a dark band near the tip; immatures have multiple dark bars. The wings are pale below with dark mottling and dark leading edges. The cere (the skin at the base of the beak), the legs, and the feet are all yellow.

Red-tails are the largest of the Bu-



**Photos courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife** teos with wingspans over four feet. Average length is about 20 inches; weight is two to four pounds. Although the coloration of the sexes is similar, females are 25-30% larger than males and may have wingspans of 56 inches.

### BEHAVIOR

Red-tailed Hawks have long bonds with their mate and live together even outside the breeding season. They are very territorial and will use the same hunting and nesting territory throughout their lives. Their territories encompass half a mile to many miles depending on availability of prey, perches, and nest sites.

For birdwatchers, the signature cry is a hoarse, descending scream, described as kree-eee-ar. The powerful cry of this bird is used in

movies and commercials depicting eagles since the eagle's cry seems wimpy and thin in contrast.

### **ADAPTATIONS: Eyes like a hawk!**

The eyesight of a hawk is 8 times as powerful as that of humans. This doesn't mean their vision magnifies objects, but that they have greater resolving power. To a Red-tail, a mouse is perfectly clear at 100 feet or more where it would look like a blur to us. Hawks also have excellent color vision extending into the ultraviolet range so they see more colors than we do.

### **DIET/FEEDING**

Despite the colloquial name "Chicken Hawk", 85 to 90 % of the Red-tailed Hawk's diet is composed of small rodents with rabbits, snakes and lizards as side dishes. In some areas and seasons, large insects are a major food item. Basically, Red-tails concentrate on what can be easily caught, so their diet will vary with season and region. In winter, jackrabbits (twice the weight of most Red-tails!) are a favored item. The birds do most of their hunting from a perch or from mid-altitude flight, swooping down to seize their prey.

### **REPRODUCTION**

Red-tailed Hawks reach sexual maturity at two to three years of age. They are monogamous, but court anew each spring. During courtship, the male and female fly in wide rising circles while uttering shrill cries. At great heights, the male performs diving displays. After the courtship flight, the birds spiral to a perch and preen each other before mating.

Red-tailed Hawks prefer to build their stick nests in tall trees. Both males and females assist in nest construction. They are extremely sensitive to disturbance during nest building and may even abandon the nest.

The female lays 1 - 3 dull white eggs that both parents incubate for four to five weeks. When the eggs hatch, the female broods the downy

white young, and the male provides most of the food for his mate and the chicks. The young remain in the nest for several more weeks while they grow as large as the parent birds. After they leave the nest, chicks begin to chase the parents for food, and the adults will drop live prey for the young to catch. Even with a full stomach, the young will play-chase things that look like prey. The majority of juveniles don't start catching their own food until 6 to 7 weeks after they leave the nest.

While many of these birds do not survive the hazards of youth, those that survive the first few years may live 20 years.

### **CONSERVATION**

Adult Red-tailed Hawks have few predators. Most predation on this species occurs to eggs and nestlings. Availability of nest sites and food supply are the natural factors limiting populations. Man is the main threat. Red-tails are vulnerable to loss of habitat, environmental toxins (including lead from shot), illegal shooting, nest disturbance and cars.

Despite these factors, Red-tailed



Hawk numbers seem to be stable or increasing and the species has extended its geographic range over the last 100 years. This is most likely a response to habitat changes that have increased the number of habitat "edges" and created a mosaic of interspersed wooded and open areas that Red-tails prefer.

Red-tailed Hawks play a beneficial role by controlling rodents, rabbits, rattlesnakes and even grasshoppers. Red-tailed Hawks are considered to be a sign of good luck in the New Mexico Mescalero Apache tradition; farmers and ranchers should consider them with similar regard.

State and federal laws protect all raptors. Even though Red-tails are not on the US Fish and Wildlife's Endangered or Threatened Species List, they are protected by the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

---

Wildlife Notes are published by  
the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.  
This note and many others are available online at  
[http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us/education/wildlife\\_notes/WildlifeNotes.htm](http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us/education/wildlife_notes/WildlifeNotes.htm)  
You may download, copy and distribute these.

For further information call the Conservation Education Section at  
(505) 476-8119 or 476-8095.