
Swainson's Hawk

Buteo swainsoni

Aves — Falconiformes — Accipitridae

CONSERVATION STATUS / CLASSIFICATION

Rangewide: Secure (G5)
Statewide: Vulnerable breeding (S3B)
ESA: No status
USFS: Region 1: No status; Region 4: No status
BLM: Watch list (Type 5)
IDFG: Protected nongame

BASIS FOR INCLUSION

Threats on migration and wintering grounds.

TAXONOMY

No subspecies are recognized and there is no geographic trend in morphology (England et al. 1997).

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

Swainson's hawk breeds in portions of Alaska and western Canada, east to Minnesota and Illinois, and south to southern California, parts of Mexico, Texas, and Missouri; eastern breeding limits are unstable (England et al. 1997, Groves et al. 1997a). This species winters from the southwestern U.S. and southeastern Florida (irregularly) south to South America; the primary winter range for the Swainson's hawk is located on the pampas of Argentina (England et al. 1997). From prairie Canada, the migration from breeding to wintering grounds is >10,000 km each way – a distance second among raptors only to that of the Arctic peregrine falcon. Nearly 350,000 Swainson's hawks have been counted flying over a single point in Panama City in October and November, and up to 845,000 have been counted in a single autumn in Veracruz, Mexico (England et al. 1997). In Idaho, this species breeds throughout the southern half of the state, as well in the Palouse region of the northwest (Burleigh 1972, Bechard et al. 1986, Groves et al. 1997a). Is generally absent from the Idaho panhandle except as an uncommon fall transient (Burleigh 1972). There are an estimated 16,800 breeding individuals in Idaho (Rosenberg 2004).

POPULATION TREND

Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data indicate relatively stable population numbers for the Swainson's hawk in Idaho, the West, and the U.S. as a whole. There are no statistically significant increases or declines for either the long-term period 1966–2004 or the more short-term periods of 1966–1979 or 1980–2004 for any of these geographic areas (Sauer et al. 2005). This species is considered abundant and stable in Idaho (M. J. Bechard, Boise State University, pers. comm.).

HABITAT AND ECOLOGY

Swainson's hawk occurs in open pine/oak woodlands, and in agricultural areas (e.g., alfalfa and other hay crops, and certain grain and row crops, but not vineyards, orchards, rice, or corn) with scattered trees (Groves et al. 1997a). During migration, this species also is found in grasslands and other open country. In Idaho, the Swainson's hawk prefers to nest in trees or shrubs near riparian zones adjacent to agricultural lands (Groves et al. 1997a). Historically and in existing native habitat, this species forages in open stands of grass-dominated vegetation, sparse shrublands, and small, open woodlands. More recently, the Swainson's hawk has adapted well to foraging in agricultural habitats, but cannot forage effectively in crops that grow much higher than native grasses because of the difficulty of finding prey (Bechard 1982, England et al. 1997). During the breeding season, main prey items are small mammals, such as young ground squirrels and pocket gophers.

ISSUES

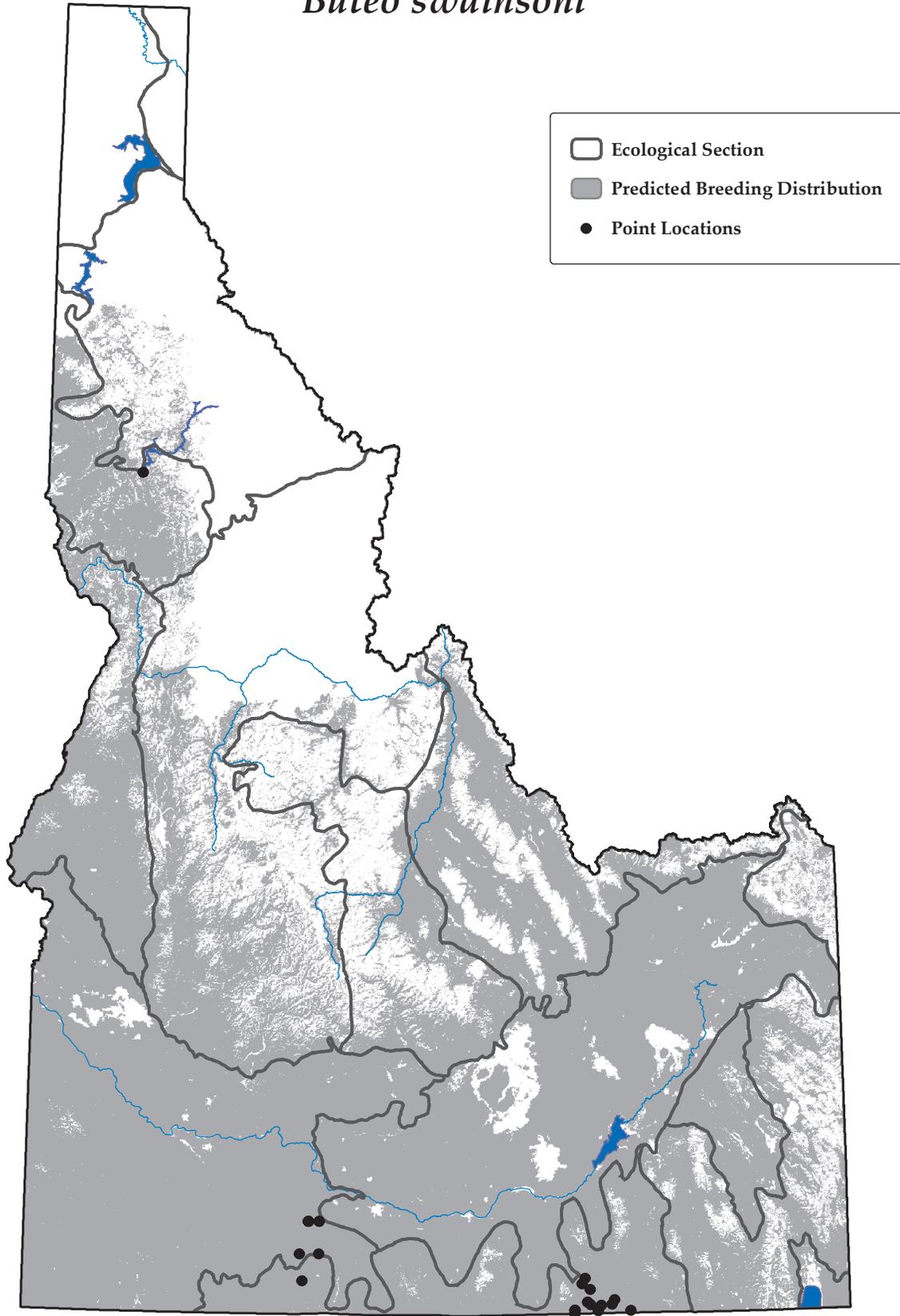
Main issues affecting Swainson's hawk relate to the vulnerability of this species where it congregates in large numbers during migration and on the wintering grounds. Nearly 6000 birds died in Argentina in 1995 and 1996 as a result of being sprayed directly by organophosphate insecticides used to control grasshopper outbreaks in alfalfa and sunflower fields (England et al. 1997). On the breeding grounds, such as those throughout southern Idaho, conversion of native grasslands to alfalfa fields and other hay crops seems to cause negligible impacts; conversion to woody perennial crops and urban development, on the other hand, is known to eliminate Swainson's hawks (England et al. 1997). A more recent concern is the development of wind farms, such as those in southern Idaho, where hawks could potentially collide with turbines during spring and fall migration movements (Erickson et al. 2001).

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Primary actions should focus on maintaining and/or restoring native grasslands in order to retain adequate foraging and nesting habitats while other areas are inevitably lost to urban development. As economic conversion of agricultural areas to commercial and residential real estate continues, potential impacts on breeding Swainson's hawk populations should be closely monitored (England et al. 1997). Migration corridors should be identified and important stopover habitat protected. Better data on mortality rates of migrating Swainson's hawks (and other raptors) as a result of wind farm development are needed. Finally, alternative, less toxic pesticides and grasshopper baits should be tested in Argentina (England et al. 1997).

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Map created on September 22, 2005
and prepared by Idaho Conservation Data Center.
Sources: Point data are from Idaho Conservation Data Center,
Idaho Department of Fish and Game (2005). Predicted distribution
is from the Wildlife Habitat Relationships Models (WHR),
A Gap Analysis of Idaho: Final Report. Idaho Cooperative Fish
and Wildlife Research Unit, Moscow, ID (Scott et al. 2002).
Predicted distribution is approximate (for more information, go to
http://www.wildlife.uidaho.edu/idgap/idgap_report.asp).

