



Volume 29/Issue 3

Red-tailed Hawk

November 2015

# Red-tailed Hawk

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# The Red-tailed Hawk

**T**he red-tailed hawk is one of the most common large hawks in North America. It calls Idaho home all year-round. The bird gets its name from its rusty-red tail. Red-tails are often seen soaring high overhead. Their long, broad wings are built for soaring on the warm air that rises off the ground. Because they spend a lot of time soaring, red-tailed hawks live in open habitats with scattered trees or other perches.

You can identify this hawk from several characteristics. The first is its rusty-red tail. You can most easily see this when the hawk is perched. Red-tailed hawks tend to be dark on their back and wings. Their underwings and belly are usually light-colored. Many red-tailed hawks also have a band of dark streaking across their bellies. Bird watchers call this a belly band. But not all red-tailed hawks look exactly alike! This species has 16 different varieties, called sub-species. They are found in different parts of North America.

Red-tailed hawks are sit-and-wait hunters. They find a tall perch and watch the ground for their prey. Most hunting is done from a perch. The hawks are looking for small mammals such as voles, mice, rats, gophers, ground squirrels, rabbits and hares. They also eat a lot of small birds and snakes.

Red-tailed hawks are good parents. They usually mate for life and will use the same nest many times. The nest is usually built in the top of a tall tree in a wooded area. Sometimes red-tails will nest on cliffs. A famous male red-tailed hawk, called Pale Male, nested on the ledge of an apartment building in New York City!

The nest is made of sticks and lined with green leaves and bark. The female lays one to five smooth white eggs that she will incubate for about a month. The male brings food to his mate and the young hawks. A young hawk is called an eyas (EYE-ess). They stay in the nest for more than a month. When young hawks leave the nest, they stay around the nest tree for several more weeks. During this time, they practice their

hunting and flying skills, preparing for life on their own.

Watch for red-tailed hawks soaring overhead. You can also listen for their distinctive screaming call. It sounds like “kee-eeeeee-arrrr” and is usually given when the bird is soaring. If you hear that sound, look up and you will probably see a red-tailed hawk.



# The Hawk Family



Photo by Mike Morrison

defend their nest. Intruders are often chased away by the parent birds.

Young hawks look very different from their parents. They might have feathers with different colors and patterns. Several species have yellowish eyes when they are young, but their eyes turn red when they are adults. Young bald eagles have dark beaks that turn yellow when they are adults. It might take several years for young hawks to get their adult feathers.

**H**awks are a large group of usually solitary birds of prey. Scientists have identified at least 235 different species. They are closely related to falcons. You can see hawks just about anywhere in the world except the high Arctic and in Antarctica. Here in Idaho, you can see 11 different species of hawk.

Hawks share a number of characteristics. They are diurnal (die-UR-nal). This means that they are active during the day. Hawks have hooked beaks used for tearing their food. They have strong legs and feet that they use for grasping and killing prey. Excellent eyesight lets hawks spot their food a mile away! Each eye is shaded by a bony ridge that makes the hawk look mad!

Most hawks mate for life. They build large stick nests in trees, on cliffs or on man-made structures. Some species will build their nest on the ground. Nests are often re-used for many years. Sometimes, a nest that has been used for a long time can get so heavy that it breaks the tree it is built in! Eagle nests are known for weighing hundreds of pounds. Many hawks will aggressively

Female hawks of all species are larger than the males. No one is quite sure why this is the case. Scientists believe it might have to do with incubation. Keeping eggs and nestlings warm is easier when the bird is larger. Because females are larger, they can catch different prey than the males. This helps make sure that the nestlings get enough to eat. If you see several hawks perched together, see if you can tell the difference between the males and females.

Hawks are familiar birds because we often see them soaring high above. Unfortunately, this makes them easy targets for people to shoot.

Long ago, people thought hawks were bad. They thought hawks would eat livestock and even small children. We now know a lot more about hawks and what they really eat. This has helped people understand the important role hawks play in the food web. Hawks are now protected, and most people enjoy the sight of a hawk soaring through the sky.



Photo by Thomas O'Neil (<http://www.thomasoneil.com/photo.php?f=416>) [CC BY 2.5 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

# Types of Hawks

Hawks are divided into six different groups. Here in Idaho, we have representatives of five of these groups.

## Buteo (byou-TEE-o) ►



Cooper's Hawk

Photo by Catherine Zinsky

Buteos are large hawks with long, broad wings. Their short tail helps with steering. They are often seen soaring overhead. Idaho's buteos are the red-tailed hawk, Swainson's hawk and ferruginous hawk. Rough-legged hawks are a buteo that spends the winter in Idaho.



Swainson's Hawk

Photo by Dick Daniels (<http://carolinabirds.org/>) (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>) or GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>)], via Wikimedia Commons

## ◀ Accipiter

Accipiters are forest hawks. Their short, rounded wings and long tails are perfect for flying in the woods. Their long legs and powerful feet help them capture birds, their main food. All three

accipiters can be seen in Idaho—sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's hawk and northern goshawk.



Northern Harrier

Photo by Len Blumin from Mill Valley, California, United States (Northern Harrier) [CC BY 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

## Harrier ►

Harriers are birds of open grassy habitats. They have small bodies with long, broad wings that let them fly slowly as they look for prey. Their face is shaped a bit like an owl's. This helps the harrier locate food in tall grass. The northern harrier is the only North American harrier. You can see it in Idaho.

continued...

# Types of Hawks cont.

## Eagles ▶

Eagles are the largest of the hawks. They can be three feet tall and have a six-foot wingspan. Their feet are powerful and are used for grabbing and killing prey. You can see bald eagles along rivers and lakes in Idaho. They mainly eat fish. Golden eagles, on the other hand, like open country. They eat mammals such as rabbits, hares and ground squirrels.



**Bald Eagles**

Photo by Gary Power

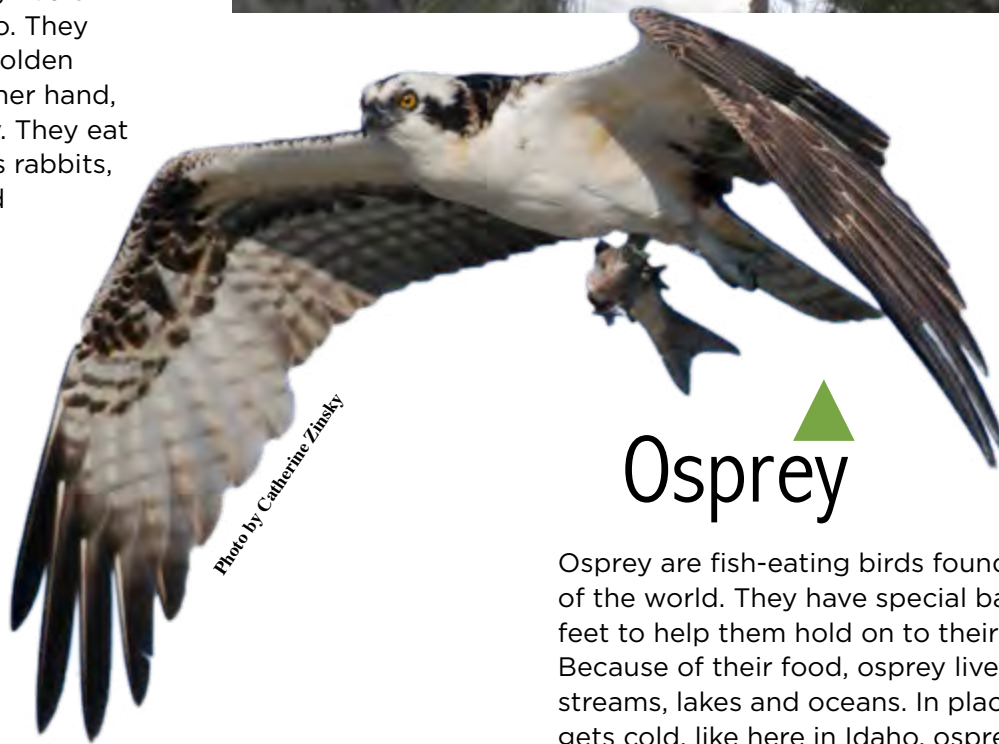


Photo by Catherine Zinsky

## Osprey ▶

Osprey are fish-eating birds found in many parts of the world. They have special barbs on their feet to help them hold on to their slippery catch. Because of their food, osprey live along rivers, streams, lakes and oceans. In places where it gets cold, like here in Idaho, ospreys migrate in the fall. Scientists estimate that a single osprey migrates over 160,000 miles during its 15 to 20 year lifespan.

## ◀ Kites

Kites are a group of small hawks that mainly eat insects. Their small feet and talons are perfect tools for catching small food. Kites do not live in Idaho.



**Mississippi Kite**

Photo by Dick Daniels (<http://carolinabirds.org/>) (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>) or GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>)], via Wikimedia Commons

# Eye See You!



By Allison Miller (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

**G**ood eyesight is important to hawks. They can spot prey from long distances and keep it in focus until it is caught. Like most predators, hawks have eyes that face forward, just like yours. Both eyes look at something at the same time. This is called binocular vision. Hawks can also see things off to the side by using their right or left eye by itself. This is called monocular vision. Try out your monocular vision by covering one eye.

Because hawks have both binocular and monocular vision, they have two well-focused side views and one well-focused front view. Large numbers of special cells called cones are grouped together to form foveae (fo-VEE). The foveae give the bird very sharp vision. Foveae also let the hawk see in color.

Hawks and other birds of prey have two kinds of foveae. The central foveae provide sharp monocular vision on either side of the bird. Temporal foveae give the bird sharp binocular vision when looking straight ahead. These birds have three well-focused views at the same time. This is a big advantage when finding and catching prey that might be running, flying, or swimming.

Birds of prey are also able to focus their eyes very quickly. The lens of the eye and the shape of the eye can change rapidly. This keeps objects in focus. These changes in the eye are called "accommodation." A falcon diving to capture a bird can keep its prey in clear focus from the time it spots the prey until the prey is caught, and dinner is served.



Photo by Catherine Zinsky

# Day Shift



Photo by U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Night Shift

**H**ave you ever noticed that similar animals share the same habitat? It's kind of like your family sharing the space in your house. Maybe you do your homework at the kitchen table before dinner. Later on, your teenage sister uses the table to finish a project. You both use the table, just at different times.

Hawks and owls also share habitat. Red-tailed hawks are the day shift, but great horned owls take over at night. Sharp-shinned hawks are active during the day and screech owls hang out at night. This is something scientists

call niche (nitch) partitioning. It allows similar animals to share the same habitat.

Animals are able to do this because they have different adaptations and hunting strategies. Hawks are visual hunters. Daylight helps them spot their prey that is out during the day. Owls, on the other hand, can hunt in the dark. They listen for their nocturnal prey. A red-tailed hawk trying to hunt at night would probably fly into a tree—ouch! A great horned owl might not find its prey out during the daytime. Having a way to share the habitat helps different animals survive.

## Hawk Migration?

**W**hat kind of bird do you think of when you hear the word migration? Most of us don't think about hawks, but just like many songbirds and ducks, migration is important for some kinds of hawk, too.

Like many migrating birds, the weather and food play a role in the start of hawk migration. Unlike many other birds, most hawks migrate by themselves. They are solitary. The Swainson's hawk is an exception. It migrates in large groups, called kettles. Their journey takes them from Idaho all the way to Argentina.

Hawks migrate during the daytime. This makes sense when you think about how they migrate.

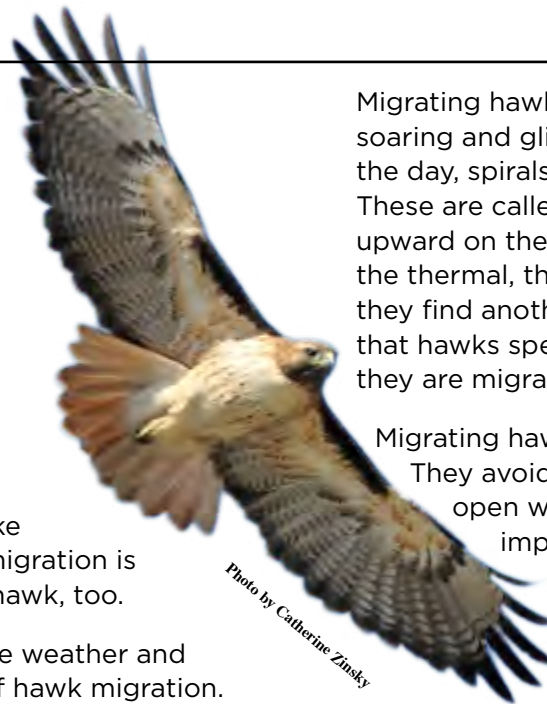


Photo by Catherine Zinsky

Migrating hawks save energy by doing a lot of soaring and gliding. As the land heats up during the day, spirals of warm air rise off the ground. These are called thermals. Migrating hawks soar upward on thermals. When they reach the top of the thermal, they glide toward the ground until they find another thermal. Scientists have found that hawks spend 79% of their time gliding when they are migrating.

Migrating hawks often follow mountain ridges.

They avoid flying over large bodies of open water like the Gulf of Mexico. An important hawk migration point in Idaho is Lucky Peak outside of Boise. Lucky Peak is at the southern end of the Boise Ridge. It has a lot of good habitat for birds to fuel up before making the 50-mile trip across the Snake River Plain. Many hawks pass over this landmark on their way south.

Idaho will host migrating red-tailed and rough-legged hawks that have left their northern breeding grounds. To them, Idaho is a warm and pleasant place to spend the winter!

# Be Outside— Feeding Birds

**W**ith winter just around the corner, now is the perfect time to put up some bird feeders. Feeding wildlife is usually not a good thing to do, but birds are different. They do not become dependent on feeders. Instead, birds just include yards with feeders in their daily search for food. If the feeders are empty, the birds move on to other food sources.

You can buy bird feeders or build your own. Building a bird feeder is a fun family project. Look for feeder plans at the library or on the internet. Make several kinds of feeders to feed different birds. Tube feeders attract birds like house finches, goldfinches, chickadees and nuthatches. Platform feeders will attract these birds as well as house sparrows, juncos, song sparrows and Steller's jays. Ground feeders are a favorite with mourning doves, juncos, white-crowned sparrows and California quail. Good foods for birds include black-oil sunflower seed, millet, nyger thistle, and safflower seed.

When you feed the birds, you might also attract bird-eating hawks. Both sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks will try to make a meal from the birds at your feeders. Some people do not like this, but it is important to remember that the hawks need to eat, too. Life as a predatory bird is not easy. More often than not, the hawks will not be successful. Their swoop through your yard will send the birds fleeing to shelter. When the coast is clear, the birds will return to the feeders. Birds that feed in flocks, like quail, often have a sentinel. This bird watches for danger and alerts the flock. This behavior also helps other kinds of birds at the feeders. This warning system often spoils the element of surprise for the hungry hawk.

Enjoy feeding the birds. You might be amazed at what you see in your own backyard!

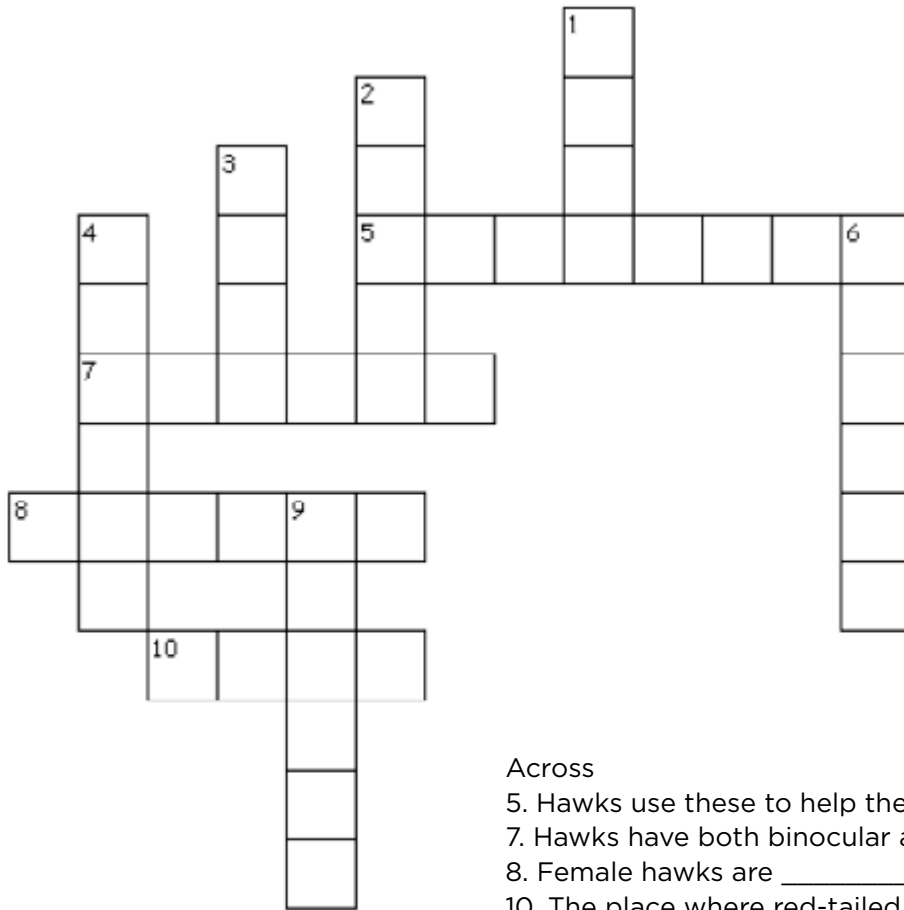


**BE OUTSIDE**  
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE





# Hawk Criss-cross



## WORDS

Buteo  
 Eleven  
 Eyas  
 Foveae  
 Larger  
 Soar  
 Sticks  
 Thermals  
 Tree  
 Vision

### Across

5. Hawks use these to help them migrate.
7. Hawks have both binocular and monocular \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Female hawks are \_\_\_\_\_ than male hawks.
10. The place where red-tailed hawks usually make a nest.

### Down

1. Red-tailed hawks like to \_\_\_\_\_.
2. A red-tailed hawk is this type of hawk.
3. The name for a young hawk.
4. These give hawks sharp vision.
6. Red-tailed hawks use \_\_\_\_\_ to build a nest.
9. In Idaho, we have \_\_\_\_\_ hawk species.

## WILDLIFE EXPRESS

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!  
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