

WILDLIFE VIEWING GUIDE
TO
IDAHO'S RAPTORS



Idaho's rugged landscapes are home to a wide variety of **raptors**—birds with powerful talons, hooked beaks, sharp vision, and a carnivorous diet. From the iconic Bald Eagle soaring high above rivers to the swift Peregrine Falcon darting through mountain valleys, Idaho provides a rich range of habitats for these amazing birds.

Join us on a journey to explore the fascinating world of Idaho's **17 raptor species**, with a special focus on the diurnal birds of prey that dominate the skies during the day. We'll uncover their behaviors, habitats, and the best places to view these incredible birds in action across Idaho's diverse landscapes.



IDAHO'S RAPTORS

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WHAT IS A RAPTOR?



Red-tailed Hawk

Raptors are birds of prey known for their **sharp talons**, **hooked beaks**, and **excellent eyesight**, all designed for hunting. These carnivorous birds mainly eat rodents, fish, reptiles, and smaller birds, which helps control prey populations and keep ecosystems balanced. In Idaho, they can be found in various habitats, including forests, mountains, grasslands, and cities.

Raptors fall into two main types: diurnal (daytime) and nocturnal (nighttime). **Diurnal raptors**, such as hawks, eagles, and falcons, hunt using their keen vision and fast flight. Nocturnal raptors, like owls, are adapted for night hunting with excellent night vision and acute hearing.

Idaho is home to 27 raptor species during their breeding season, making it an important place for raptor conservation and observation. This guidebook will focus on **17 species** of diurnal raptors, offering tips for identifying them and suggesting the best spots to see them.

DIURNAL RAPTORS

Diurnal raptors are classified in the order Falconiformes, which is divided into four distinct families:



New World Vultures (Cathartidae):

These scavenging birds include species like the Turkey Vulture and the California Condor. They mainly eat carrion, which is the decaying flesh of dead animals. By consuming this decaying matter, they play an important role in keeping the environment clean.

Falcons (Falconidae): Known for their incredible speed and flying skill, birds like the Peregrine Falcon and the American Kestrel are expert hunters. They catch birds and insects in mid air with amazing accuracy.



Hawks and Eagles (Accipitradae):

This family includes many types of diurnal raptors, such as hawks, eagles, and harriers. Notable members include the Red-tailed Hawk and the Bald Eagle. These birds hunt various prey, including small mammals, birds, and reptiles.

Osprey (Pandionidae): The osprey is a special bird of prey that mainly eats fish. It is known for its ability to hover over water before diving feet first to catch fish with its sharp talons. The osprey is well-suited for life near water and can be found around rivers, lakes, and coastal areas.



MIGHTY TOOLS FEET AND TALONS



Osprey

Raptor feet are designed for capturing and holding onto their prey with incredible strength. **Talons**, which are curved, sharp claws, enable raptors to hold their prey. Raptors have four strong toes on each foot, with three pointing forward and one backward, making it easier to hold on tightly to their prey. Along with incredible strength in their feet, most raptor feet have a ratcheting mechanism that locks their toes in place while on a prey. These features are very important for hunting, as raptors use the deadly grip of their talons to kill their food.

Fun Fact: Ospreys, which feed exclusively on fish, have an outer toe that can rotate to grip their slippery prey.



American Kestrel

HOOKED FOR THE HUNT THE BEAK

A raptor's beak is a specialized tool adapted for hunting and eating prey. It features a **sharply curved and pointed tip**, which allows the raptor to efficiently tear through flesh. The edges of the beak are sharp, sometimes serrated, to aid in slicing meat. This beak is both strong and robust, capable of handling tough prey. Additionally, the nostrils are positioned at the base of the beak, ensuring the hawk can breathe easily while holding its prey.

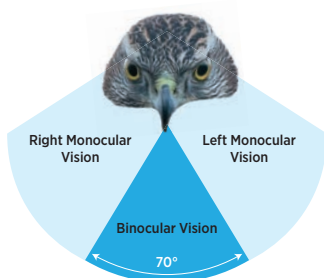
Fun Fact: Falcons have a notched upper beak for breaking the necks of small birds and mammals they catch with their feet.



EYE SEE YOU!

American Goshawk

Raptors have amazing eyes that help with hunting. Their forward-facing eyes give them great **binocular** vision, which helps them judge distances accurately. They also have **monocular** vision to see to the sides. Raptors' eyes are huge, taking up about one-third of their skulls, which lets them gather more light and see better in dim conditions. Since they can't move their eyes like humans, they have to turn their whole heads. A bony structure called the sclerotic ring helps support their eyes and keeps their shape, even under pressure, like during high-speed dives!



Raptors' eyes are packed with cone cells that allow them to see colors and are concentrated in special areas called foveae. They have two kinds of foveae: one for sharp side vision and another for clear front vision, letting them see three sharp images at the same time. Raptors can also quickly adjust their eye lenses to focus on moving objects, which helps them stay locked on their targets. Their distance vision is incredible—falcons, for example, can spot prey from two miles away.

GENDER REVEAL

American Kestrel male (left)
and female (right)

In raptors, males and females often differ in size and appearance, which helps with hunting and reproduction. These differences in size and plumage play important roles in survival.

Size Surprise

In many raptor species, females are often much larger than males, sometimes by as much as one-third. This difference, known as **reverse sexual dimorphism**, is unusual among birds. It allows the mated pair to hunt a wider variety of prey, with the larger females better able to manage the physical demands of egg-laying and raising nestlings.

Feathered Differences

Sometimes, male and female raptors have different colors or patterns in their plumage, and these differences can vary by species. These variations often help with reproduction and survival. For example, female raptors may have more complex or mottled markings to help them blend in while nesting or caring for their young. In contrast, males might have brighter or more noticeable markings to attract mates during courtship.

Plumage Evolution

It's important to understand that when raptors are young, it can be hard to tell males and females apart just by their feathers. Juvenile (or immature) raptors often have similar plumage, regardless of their sex. However, as they mature into adults, their feathers change, and by the time they are fully grown, the differences between male and female plumage may become more clear.

RAPTOR ROMANCE

LOVE IS IN THE AIR

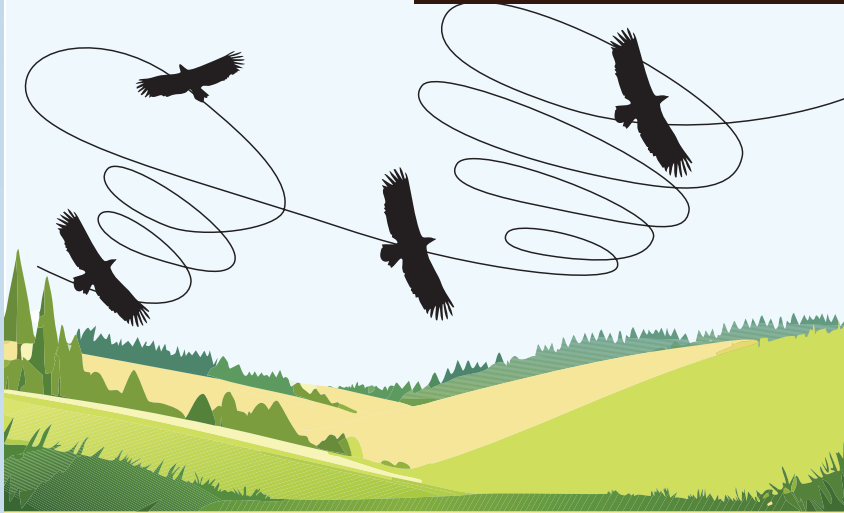


Raptors have fascinating courtship rituals that help strengthen pair bonds. They can vary by species, but often include impressive aerial displays, vocalizations, and food exchanges. Pairs may soar together, dive at each other, or even lock talons in mid-air, showing off their agility and strength. Vocal calls are also used to communicate and attract mates.

One common behavior is courtship feeding, where the male catches prey and offers it to the female, showing he can provide food for their future young. These rituals not only form a bond between the pair, but also establish a territory and help ensure strong, capable mates. In some raptors, like eagles or falcons, pairs may remain together for several breeding seasons or even for life, repeating these rituals each year to reaffirm their bond.

Fun Fact: Nest cams give us a bird's-eye view into the secret lives of raptors, turning anyone with an internet connection into an instant ornithologist! Interested in watching nesting raptors during the breeding season? Check out Cornell Lab of Ornithology's bird cams at allaboutbirds.org/cams

RIDE THE WIND

















Raptors are amazing fliers, using different strategies to save energy and catch prey. Some raptors soar efficiently along mountain ridges by using **ridge lift**, where rising air currents help them conserve energy. They also utilize **thermals**—columns of warm, rising air—to gain altitude with minimal effort. By spiraling upward in a thermal, then gliding to the next one and repeating the process, raptors can travel great distances during migration or while searching for food.

When hunting or showing off, raptors perform aerial acrobatics like sharp turns and fast dives. Falcons, for example, are known for their high-speed dives to catch prey. Raptors also glide effortlessly through the air, using their large wingspan and specialized wing shapes to ride air currents. This gliding behavior is often observed during migration, as well as when raptors are searching for prey from a high vantage point.

SPOTTING RAPTORS IN FLIGHT

Identifying raptors while they are soaring in the sky isn't too difficult. Their unique shapes and wing patterns create distinctive silhouettes that make it easier to recognize them, even from a distance.

 <p>Falcon</p>	<p>Small to large raptor with long, tapered wings pointed at the tips and long tails; flight is fast and direct, wingbeats are often continuous throughout flight.</p>	
 <p>Forest Hawks</p>	<p>Small to large raptor with relatively short, rounded wings and long tails; typical flight is a series of flaps punctuated by a glide.</p>	
 <p>Buteo</p>	<p>Medium-to large raptor with broad wings and short tails; soar frequently and wingbeats are slow, heavy, and methodical.</p>	
 <p>Harrier</p>	<p>Medium-sized raptor with long, narrow wings and long tail; often rocks back and forth in flight.</p>	
 <p>Osprey</p>	<p>Large raptor with sharply bent (M-shaped) wings, giving it a gull-like appearance; wingbeat is stiff and deliberate.</p>	
 <p>Eagle</p>	<p>Large to very large dark raptor with long, board wings; both tend to soar and glide rather than beat wings; vultures hold wings in a bold dihedral, rocking back and forth in flight. Bald Eagles hold their wings nearly horizontal, while Golden Eagles are held slightly dihedral (shallow "V" shape), and their flight is steady.</p>	
 <p>Vulture</p>	<p></p>	

Photos: The Raptor Resource Project



EYE ON IDAHO'S RAPTORS WHERE TO WATCH

Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area

The Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area (NCA) is a protected area in southwestern Idaho, spanning over 485,000 acres along the Snake River. It's home to the greatest concentration of nesting birds of prey in North America, and perhaps, the world!

This area is important for several reasons, as it provides essential habitat for a variety of raptors. The unique landscape of cliffs, canyons, and river valleys offers perfect spots for nesting, roosting, and hunting. It serves as a key breeding ground for many raptor species, attracting thousands of birds each year to raise their young, thanks to plentiful food sources and suitable nesting sites.

Plan to visit!

The NCA provides educational opportunities for visitors to learn about raptors and their role in the ecosystem through interpretive areas, guided tours, and educational programs.





AMERICAN GOSHAWK

Astur atricapillus



Wingspan: 38-45 inches **Length:** 20-25 inches

Range & Habitat: Found across a broad range in North America. Specifically, it breeds from Alaska across most of Canada to New England, encompassing the northern Great Lakes region, and extending southward into the Rocky Mountains, Cascades, and Sierra Nevada ranges.

Diet: Mostly medium-sized birds such as grouse, pigeons, and jays. Also known to hunt mammals like squirrels, rabbits, and occasionally bats.

Nesting: Nests in mature forests, choosing large trees. Builds stick nests lined with bark and feathers. Females lay 2-4 eggs and incubates them while the male supplies food. Nests may be reused and refreshed each year.

Behavior: Use stealthy tactics, surprising prey with sudden speed and agility. Skilled at navigating dense forests and swiftly maneuvering through branches, they are territorial and defend their nesting areas aggressively during the breeding season.

Migration: While some individuals may move short distances in response to changing food availability, they are generally non-migratory or only undertake local movements.

Conservation Concerns: Habitat loss from improper forest management and urbanization, disruptions from outdoor recreation, and climate challenges affecting habitat and prey.

Raptor Watch: In Idaho, they are mainly found in mature coniferous, aspen, and mixed forests, especially in the Clearwater, Idaho, Payette, Sawtooth, and Caribou-Targhee National Forests.

Talon Tidbit: American Goshawk pairs build and maintain up to eight nests in their territory, often using the same nest each year or switching if previous nests are unsuccessful.



AMERICAN KESTREL

Falco sparverius



Wingspan: 20-24 inches **Length:** 8-12 inches

Range & Habitat: Found in open fields, meadows, grasslands, deserts, and urban areas across North America (all 50 states), Central America, and South America.

Diet: Insects (such as grasshoppers and beetles), small mammals (like mice and voles), small birds, and reptiles.

Nesting: Uses natural cavities, woodpecker holes, nest boxes, and building crevices. Clutches typically consist of 4-6 eggs, with both parents involved in rearing the young.

Behavior: Often seen perched on wires or poles, scanning the ground for prey. Known for their distinctive hunting behavior, often hovering in mid-air before diving to catch prey.

Migration: Northern populations migrate south for the winter, while those in milder climates may stay year-round.

Conservation Concerns: Declining in certain regions. Potential threats from habitat loss, pesticide use, and competition for nesting sites.

Raptor Watch: Easily spotted year-round in most of Idaho. Look for them in open fields, along roadsides, and perched on power lines or telephone poles. In southern Idaho, the Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey NCA is a prime spot to find them.

Talon Tidbit: American Kestrels can see ultraviolet light, which helps them track their prey.



HELPING KESTRELS THRIVE: Learn how to build a nest box and create a bird-friendly space for American Kestrels. Visit: [nestwatch.org](https://www.nestwatch.org)



BALD EAGLE

Haliaeetus leucocephalus



Wingspan: 72-90 inches **Length:** 30-37 inches

Range & Habitat: Commonly found near large bodies of open water, such as lakes, rivers, and coastal areas. Widespread across the US, Canada, and parts of Mexico. Year-round in Idaho.

Diet: Primarily eats fish, supplemented by birds, small mammals, and carrion. They are opportunistic hunters and scavengers.

Nesting: Breeds at five years old, typically mates for life. Returns to the same nesting site each year. Builds large stick nests in tall trees near water, adding to them each season. Clutches typically consist of 1-3 eggs, with both parents involved in incubation and rearing the young.

Behavior: Skilled flyers, capable of soaring for long distances on thermal air currents.

Migration: Northern populations migrate south for the winter, while those in milder climates may stay year-round.

Conservation Concerns: Generally stable, though some local populations face threats from habitat loss, pesticide use, and avian influenza.

Raptor Watch: During winter, over 800 gather in northern Idaho along the Pend Oreille River drainage (Wolf Lodge Bay) and in the spring, along the Snake River (eastern Idaho) and around Cascade Reservoir in west-central Idaho.

Talon Tidbit: The Bald Eagle, the national symbol of the US, isn't actually bald. Its white head feathers give it that appearance. These distinctive feathers develop around four to five years of age.

Fun Fact: Bald Eagle nests are some of the largest and heaviest built by any bird! These massive stick nests can reach 5-6 feet in diameter and 2-4 feet tall, and they can weigh between 1,000-2,000 pounds or more, growing larger each season as the eagles add more material.

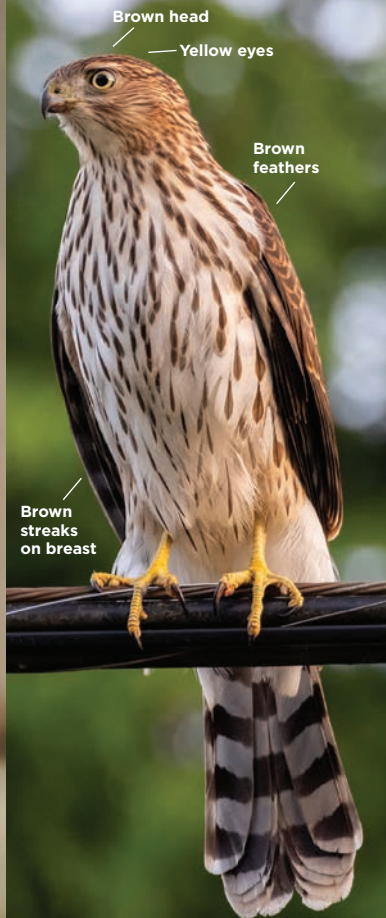


COOPER'S HAWK

Astur cooperii



Adult



Immature

Wingspan: 28-34 inches **Length:** 14-19 inches

Range & Habitat: Breeds from southern Canada to the US, some populations migrate to Central America for winter. Prefers wooded habitats. Also found in subdivisions and backyards. Found in Idaho year-round.

Diet: Mostly medium-sized birds.

Nesting: Nests in tall trees, often reuses old nests. 3-5 eggs are laid. Both parents incubate and care for young.

Behavior: Known for their “perch-hunting,” they wait silently for prey to come into view before launching a swift and sudden attack.

Migration: Spring and summer visitors to Idaho’s forests; some stay year-round. Many migrate through southwestern Idaho and winter in western Mexico.

Conservation Concerns: Stable to increasing due to adapting well to urban environments.

Raptor Watch: Common but stealthy, often hunt near bird feeders. Frequently seen during fall migration at Lucky Peak near Boise.

Talon Tidbit: Known for surprise hunting, swooping low to snatch birds from the air or feeders. They are agile and stealthy.



FERRUGINOUS HAWK

Buteo regalis

Species of Greatest
Conservation
Need

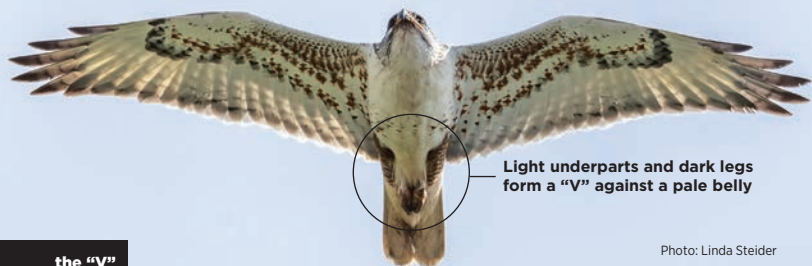


Photo: Linda Steider

Wingspan: 53-60 inches **Length:** 20-26 inches

Range & Habitat: Mostly found in the Snake River Plain and usually absent from Idaho during the nonbreeding season. Winters in Mexico, with a few residing year-round in extreme southern Idaho.

Diet: Primarily eats small to medium-sized mammals, especially rabbits and ground squirrels, but will also eat birds, reptiles, and large insects.

Nesting: Typically nest in open grasslands, sagebrush areas, and shrub-steppe habitats. They prefer to nest on high vantage points such as tall trees, utility poles, and rocky outcrops. They may also nest on the ground, especially in more open or treeless landscapes. These hawks tend to return to the same nesting sites year after year. In April 3-5 eggs are laid with young fledging about 6 weeks later.

Behavior: Often hunts from a perch or while flying, targeting small mammals. Solitary and territorial, defending their nests and hunting grounds.

Migration: Arrives in Idaho in late February or early March to begin courtship.

Conservation Concerns: Habitat loss from conversion to agriculture, urban development, and energy projects. Changes in prey populations and human disturbances can impact their nesting and hunting success. Populations appear stable across the West.

Raptor Watch: Can be seen in Idaho mostly in the southern part of the state, especially in the Snake River Plain and near shrub-steppe areas.

Talon Tidbit: North America's largest hawk!

FOR GOSHAWK'S SAKE,



FALCO FOU

PROTECT IDAHO'S RAPTORS!

Illustration by Emma Regnier



Idaho's Watchable Wildlife

Illustration by Laurel Mundy



GOLDEN EAGLE

Aquila chrysaetos

Species of Greatest
Conservation
Need

Smallish heads
compared to body size

Lighter golden-brown
feathers on back of
head and neck

Dark brown
feathers

Broad wings

Adult

Mostly
brown
feathers,
white
patches on
base of tail
and under
wings.

Immature

Photo: Krista Helmstadter

Wingspan: 72-89 inches **Length:** 28-25 inches

Range & Habitat: Inhabits western North America, including grasslands, sagebrush, and semi-open mountainous clearings. Breeding range extends from Alaska through the western US. Also found in the eastern US, though they are less common. Found year round in Idaho.

Diet: Small to medium-sized mammals, especially jackrabbits. Also hunts birds, reptiles, and occasionally scavenges on carrion.

Nesting: Builds nests on high cliffs or in trees, up to 8 feet wide, using sticks and branches lined with grasses. May reuse the same nest or alternate between several. After courtship in late February, 1-3 eggs are laid in March, with the young fledging about 10 weeks later.

Behavior: Usually seen alone or in pairs, soaring with wings in a slight "V" formation and wingtips spread like fingers. Hunts by soaring, flying low, or perching, capturing prey on or near the ground.

Migration: Mostly year round resident, but may migrate short distances depending on food availability and seasonal changes. Golden Eagles that breed in Alaska, Canada, and the Northwest Territories migrate long distances to wintering grounds in the western and central US, including the Great Plains, Intermountain West, and as far south as northern Mexico. Some may also winter in the southwestern US, particularly in areas with open terrain suitable for hunting.

Conservation Concerns: While populations in the West are stable, habitat degradation and energy development has affected nesting and hunting grounds. Lead poisoning and poaching remains a concern.

Raptor Watch: Look for them at the Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey NCA, Hells Canyon, and Owyhee Canyonlands.

Talon Tidbit: Golden Eagles can carry prey weighing up to 8 pounds while flying. The strength of their feet is about 750 pounds of pressure per square inch (psi), which is about five times the strength of an average human hand!



GYRFALCON

Falco rusticolus



Dark eyes

Coloring may range from white, gray and dark brown

Heavily barred

Spotted underparts

Yellow feet

Wingspan: 43-51 inches **Length:** 19-24 inches

Range & Habitat: Breeds throughout the Arctic and subarctic regions of North America, Europe, and Asia on arctic tundra. They are a rare winter visitor to Idaho in search of prey.

Diet: Mostly birds, but also hunts small mammals like lemmings and ground squirrels.

Nesting: Breeds in the Arctic and nests on cliffs or rocky outcrops, often reusing the same nest site year after year. 2-5 eggs are laid, which both parents help incubate. Once hatched, nestlings are cared for by both parents until they fledge.

Behavior: Mainly hunts birds in open terrain. May swoop down from above or perch on the ground while hunting.

Migration: Typically does not migrate. Some may move short distances in response to changes in prey availability or weather conditions.

Conservation Concerns: Habitat loss, disturbance at nesting sites, and climate change are significant threats to Gyrfalcon populations, particularly in areas where industrial development is expanding in the Arctic.

Raptor Watch: Occasionally spotted in Idaho during winter when they may venture south to the Snake River Plain due to limited prey availability in their northern habitats.

Talon Tidbit: Gyrfalcons are the largest, most powerful, and rarest falcon in the world!



MERLIN

Falco columbarius



Wingspan: 21-27 inches **Length:** 9-12 inches

Range & Habitat: Found in diverse habitats, from the taiga and boreal forests in the north to prairies and grasslands in central North America. They are also commonly found in coastal regions or along forest edges in the Pacific Northwest. In Idaho, they are typically found in the southern and central regions, but can also be found in forested habitats in the north. Some are year round residents.

Diet: Mostly small birds, which they capture in flight. Also hunts insects, small mammals, and occasionally bats.

Nesting: A rare breeder in Idaho, nests have been found in the northern and southeastern parts of Idaho. Nests in trees, shrubs, or on ledges, often reusing old crow or raven nests. 3-6 eggs are laid. Both parents incubate the eggs, and care for and feed the young.

Behavior: Skilled aerial hunters that use surprise attacks and fast chases to catch prey. Known for their high-speed stoops, where they dive quickly from above to surprise and catch their prey.

Migration: Merlins breeding in the northern parts of the continent typically migrate southward to US and Mexico for the winter. Common migrant in Idaho and locally abundant winter residents.

Conservation Concerns: Habitat degradation.

Raptor Watch: Look for them at Lucky Peak near Boise during fall migration. During winter they may frequent cities, towns, feedlots, and dairies where small birds are plentiful.

Talon Tidbit: About the size of a pigeon, they used to be called "pigeon hawk."



NORTHERN HARRIER

Circus hudsonius



Wingspan: 38-48 inches **Length:** 16-20 inches

Range & Habitat: Widespread across North America, from northern Alaska and Canada to northern Mexico. Found year round in Idaho in wide open spaces like wetlands, grasslands, and agricultural fields.

Diet: Small rodents, but also eat birds, reptiles, and frogs.

Nesting: In March and April, males perform dramatic courtship flights, diving from 50-100 feet and somersaulting at the top. May be polygamous, with one male mating with two or more females. Nests are built on the ground among cattails, shrubs, or tall grasses by late May, with 3-9 eggs laid. Young can fly 25-30 days after hatching, but leave the nest earlier to hide in nearby vegetation

Behavior: Agile and acrobatic, covering large distances while flying low over open terrain.

Migration: Some may migrate to regions in the southwestern US, Central America, and northern South America.

Conservation Concerns: Habitat degradation.

Raptor Watch: Look for them in open areas including the Snake River Plain and Camas Prairie, and wetlands around Lake Cascade and Bear Lake.

Talon Tidbit: They have a distinctive facial disc, similar to owls, which helps them hear prey moving.



OSPREY

Pandion haliaetus



White head

Dark eye stripe

White belly

Brown upperparts

Yellow eyes

Females have more streaking on chest

Male

Female

Wingspan: 59-67 inches **Length:** 21-26 inches

Range & Habitat: Found from the Arctic to Central America. Common near lakes, rivers, and coastal areas. Summer residents in northern, central, and eastern Idaho. Less common in southwestern Idaho.

Diet: Fish.

Nesting: Builds large, bulky nests on tall structures like trees, cliffs, or man-made platforms, using sticks and branches. Nesting starts in late March to early April, with 2-4 eggs incubated by both parents for 35-43 days.

Behavior: Skilled at catching fish. Often hover above the water before diving in feet first.

Migration: Most western Osprey spend winters along the western coasts of Central and South America throughout the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean. In fact, an Osprey banded at Lake Cascade has been sighted several times in Louisiana!

Conservation Concerns: Habitat loss, water pollution, and human disturbance from recreational activities.

Raptor Watch: Commonly nest near Lake Coeur d'Alene, Lake Pend Oreille, the Snake River and its reservoirs such as Swan Falls and Brownlee, the Boise River corridor near Lucky Peak Reservoir and the Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area, as well as Henry's Fork, Island Park Reservoir, Lake Cascade, and Payette Lake.

Talon Tidbit: They have specialized adaptations for fishing, including reversible outer toes and barbed pads under their toes to grip slippery fish.



PEREGRINE FALCON

Falco peregrinus

Black cap dipping below the eyes to cover the cheeks

Thick mustache

Dark slate-blue back

Long, pointed wings in flight

Buffy barred belly and legs

Strongly barred tail



Wingspan: 37-46 inches **Length:** 14-18 inches

Range & Habitat: Found worldwide, except in Antarctica. In North America, they breed from the Arctic to Mexico. Highly adaptable. In Idaho, found across various habitats, including cliffs and river canyons as well as some urban areas where tall buildings mimic their natural cliffside habitats.

Diet: Mainly feeds on other birds, such as pigeons, ducks, and songbirds.

Nesting: Nests, called scrapes, are shallow depressions in gravel or dirt, where 3-4 eggs are laid. Very territorial during breeding, aggressively defending nesting sites, with both parents sharing incubation duties.

Behavior: Known for speed and precision, they hunt by soaring high and diving at a high-speed stoop, striking and killing prey mid air with their talons.

Migration: Most migrate, especially from northern regions. Winters are spent in Central and South America. Some remain year round in Idaho if food is plentiful.

Conservation Concerns: Populations in Idaho are considered stable. Habitat degradation and avian influenza are emerging concerns.

Raptor Watch: Look for them along the Snake River Canyon, Hells Canyon, Sawtooth National Recreation Area, and even downtown Boise!

Talon Tidbit: During their hunting dive, called a stoop, they can reach speeds of over 240 mph, making them the fastest animal on the planet!

Fun Fact: The Peregrine is the official state raptor of Idaho. 



PRAIRIE FALCON

Falco mexicanus



Yellow cere

White line over eye

Narrow mustache

Pale cheek

Sandy brown upperparts

Brown spotting on
chest and belly

Pointed wings

Yellow legs and feet

Wingspan: 35-45 inches **Length:** 15-19 inches

Range & Habitat: Ranges across western North America, from southern Canada to northern Mexico. Found mostly in the southern and central parts of Idaho in open, arid landscapes like grasslands, sagebrush deserts, and rugged cliffs.

Diet: Mainly feeds on other small to medium-sized birds, such as sparrows and doves, as well as small mammals like ground squirrels, and insects.

Nesting: Typically nests on cliff ledges but may also use large trees or man-made structures like building ledges. Both parents share incubation of the 3-5 eggs and care for the young.

Behavior: Highly territorial, especially during the breeding season. May engage in aerial displays and vocalizations to defend their territory.

Migration: More are “wanderers” than true migrants. Their range expands and contracts throughout the year, making their migratory patterns less defined than other raptors. In Idaho, when ground squirrels enter dormancy (similar to hibernation) in early summer, Prairie Falcons migrate northeast to areas like Montana, the Dakotas, and Canada, where squirrels remain available. They stay for a few weeks to months before beginning their fall migration south, following the plains or grasslands east of the Rockies to Texas or Oklahoma. This is known as a “circular” or “loop” migration. Some falcons also return to breeding areas in the fall or stay nearby if winters are mild.

Conservation Concerns: Populations in Idaho are generally considered to be stable, but they face threats from habitat loss, human disturbance, and environmental changes.

Raptor Watch: Look for them at the Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey NCA, and areas around the Craters of the Moon National Monument.

Talon Tidbit: Like other falcons, they have a special “tomial tooth” (notch) on their upper beak, which allows them to quickly sever the spinal cord of their prey, making them highly efficient hunters.



RED-TAILED HAWK

Buteo jamaicensis

Dark brown back

Dark band across their bellies

Pale underbellies

Reddish-brown tail (immatures don't have red tails)

Adult

Wingspan: 43-56 inches **Length:** 17-22 inches

Range & Habitat: One of the most widespread raptors in North America, ranging from Alaska and Canada to Central America. Found year-round in Idaho, they inhabit open fields, grasslands, deserts, forests, and agricultural areas. These hawks are often seen perched on poles, trees, or fence posts along roadsides, scanning for prey.

Diet: Small mammals, such as mice, voles, and ground squirrels, but also hunt birds, reptiles, and occasionally insects.

Nesting: Usually build large nests in tall trees, cliff ledges, or man-made structures like cell towers. 1-3 eggs are laid. Both parents care for the young. Nests are often reused and added to each season.

Behavior: Known for their distinctive, raspy scream, often heard as they soar overhead. They are territorial, especially during the breeding season, and will aggressively defend their nests.

Migration: Some remain in Idaho year round, while others migrate to the southern US or Mexico.

Conservation Concerns: Populations are widespread and stable in Idaho. Their ability to adapt to human-altered landscapes has contributed to their success.

Raptor Watch: Key spots include the Snake River Plain, the Palouse region, and around Idaho's numerous rivers and canyons.

Talon Tidbit: They have a distinctive scream often heard in the wild, which is commonly used in movies and TV shows to represent various raptors, especially eagles, though it's not always accurate!



ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK

Buteo lagopus

Broad, dark
belly band

Pale underparts

Feathered legs
down to toes

Dark tail
with a
white base

Look for two main color variations, known as light and dark morphs. Light morphs have pale undersides with dark patches on their belly and wings, while dark morphs are predominantly brown with lighter wing feathers.

Wingspan: 48-56 inches **Length:** 18-23 inches

Range & Habitat: As Arctic breeders, they are primarily seen in Idaho during the winter months, where they may be found in fields and sagebrush steppe.

Diet: Mainly consists of small mammals, such as voles, lemmings, and rabbits, but they also eat birds.

Nesting: Typically nest on cliffs or in trees in their Arctic breeding grounds. They do not breed in Idaho.

Behavior: They have a variety of calls, including a high-pitched, whistling sound used during flight and while interacting with other hawks. During the winter, they are more solitary and less aggressive.

Migration: Highly migratory as they move south from their Arctic breeding grounds to Idaho and other southern areas for the winter.

Conservation Concerns: Habitat loss and environmental changes in their Arctic breeding grounds are of concern.

Raptor Watch: Commonly seen in open fields, sagebrush steppe, and grasslands in areas like the Snake River Plain, eastern Idaho near Mud Lake Wildlife Management Area, and the Owyhee Canyonlands.

Talon Tidbit: Feathered legs provide insulation and traction in snowy environments, helping them stay warm and hunt efficiently on ice and snow.



SHARP-SHINNED HAWK

Accipiter striatus



Wingspan: 20-26 inches **Length:** 9-13 inches

Range & Habitat: The smallest hawk in North America. Found across northern North America during the breeding season. Prefers dense forests, woodlands, and mixed forests. In Idaho, they are found year round. During migration, they can also be found in suburban areas with sufficient cover.

Diet: Small birds, such as sparrows and warblers, but also prey on insects and small mammals.

Nesting: Nests in dense, mature forests, often in coniferous trees, typically in sheltered locations to avoid detection, where 3-6 eggs are laid. Both parents incubate and care for the nestlings.

Behavior: A high-pitched, sharp call is often heard during the breeding season and while in flight. Very territorial during breeding, defending nesting area from other hawks and predators.

Migration: Most are migratory, moving south from their breeding grounds in Idaho to warmer regions in the southern US, Mexico, and Central America in the winter. They typically return in the spring for breeding.

Conservation Concerns: Generally stable in Idaho, though their populations can be affected by habitat loss and environmental changes.

Raptor Watch: Key locations include the Boise National Forest, the Coeur d'Alene National Forest, and riparian areas along rivers and streams.

Talon Tidbit: Often spotted around bird feeders because of the smaller songbirds that gather there.



SWAINSON'S HAWK

Buteo swainsoni



Brown-gray wings,
back, and head

Dark or reddish-
brown chest (bib)

Pale bellies

Tail with narrow bands

Wingspan: 47-54 inches **Length:** 17-22 inches

Range & Habitat: Found across southern Canada, the western and central US, and northern Mexico. Breeds in Idaho and commonly seen in open areas such as grasslands, agricultural fields, and sagebrush steppe.

Diet: Mainly consists of small mammals, such as ground squirrels and rabbits, but they also eat insects and birds.

Nesting: Builds their nests in tall trees or on utility poles and structures in open areas. The female lays 2-4 eggs, and both parents help with incubation and caring for the nestlings. Nests are usually large and constructed with sticks and other materials.

Behavior: They are known for their impressive soaring flight, often seen circling high in the sky on thermal currents. This behavior helps them spot prey from great distances. Adaptable, they can thrive in a range of environments, including urban and suburban areas.

Migration: Migrates in large flocks, traveling from their breeding grounds in Idaho to their wintering grounds in South America. Their migration is one of the longest of any North American raptor.

Conservation Concerns: Threats include habitat loss and changes in agricultural practices.

Raptor Watch: Look for Swainson's Hawks along the Snake River Plain and Magic Valley in open fields and farmlands. In Boise, check urban areas with green spaces, and in southeastern Idaho, the Bear River Valley and Pocatello region are also good spots.

Talon Tidbit: They are known for their incredible migration. Traveling as far as 6,000 miles from their breeding grounds in Idaho to their wintering habitats in South America, particularly in Argentina.



TURKEY VULTURE

Cathartus aura



Dark brown to
black feathers

Dull red or pink color
bare head

Pale bill

Wingspan: 63-71 inches **Length:** 24-28 inches

Range & Habitat: Found across most of the US and breeds in Idaho. Prefers open landscapes such as grasslands, agricultural areas, and areas with scattered trees. Often found near large bodies of water where they can find thermal updrafts to aid their soaring flight.

Diet: Primarily feeds on carrion (dead animals). Plays a crucial role in ecosystems by helping to clean up dead animal matter.

Nesting: Typically nests in a secluded spot, often using a ledge or a large tree. Both parents share the responsibility of incubating 1-3 eggs and caring for the nestlings.

Behavior: Excellent sense of smell, which helps locate carrion. Often soars in the sky, using thermal updrafts to cover large areas in search of food.

Migration: Highly migratory, traveling from breeding grounds in Idaho to wintering grounds in the southern US, Mexico, and Central America.

Conservation Concerns: Habitat loss, lead poisoning, and electrocution.

Raptor Watch: Spring and fall migrations are the best times to view. Look for them soaring high in the late afternoons, characterized by their long “fingers” at the wingtips. Notable locations for viewing include the Snake River Canyon, Sawtooth National Recreation Area, and Owyhee Mountains.

Talon Tidbit: As nature’s cleanup crew, they have an excellent sense of smell, which is quite rare among birds. They can detect the scent of decaying flesh from miles away, which helps them locate their primary food source, carrion.

HOW TO BE RAPTOR FRIENDLY



Raptors are important predators that play an essential role in maintaining the balance of ecosystems. However, they face numerous threats, such as habitat loss, poisoning from rodenticides, and collisions with man-made structures.

Here are some things you can do to keep our environment healthy and raptor friendly:

- **Install Bird-Friendly Windows:** Use window films, screens, or stickers to reduce the risk of raptors and other birds colliding with glass.
- **Provide Natural Perches:** Plant trees or install tall posts in your yard or community spaces where raptors can perch and hunt.
- **Keep Cats Indoors:** Encourage keeping cats indoors to protect both cats and local wildlife, including raptors.
- **Avoid Using Pesticides:** Choose natural pest control methods like snap traps, ultrasonic repellents, live traps, and exclusion for managing rodent populations in a more raptor-friendly way.
- **Support Local Conservation Efforts:** Get involved with or donate to organizations that focus on raptor conservation and habitat protection in your area.

BE A WILDLIFE WITNESS: PROTECT IDAHO'S RAPTORS



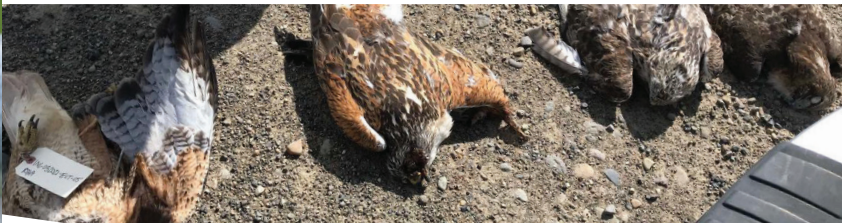
Illegal shooting, or poaching, of raptors is a serious problem in Idaho. Shooting these protected birds is illegal and you can help protect them by reporting any suspicious activity to the Citizens Against Poaching (CAP) hotline at 1-800-632-5999.

Giving accurate information when you see poaching can make a big difference by helping conservation officers investigate and increase the chances of holding violators accountable.

Important details to note include:

- **Vehicle:** Describe the vehicle, including license plate, type, and color.
- **Location:** Use a GPS or mapping app to mark the exact spot where you saw the incident happen.
- **Wildlife:** Identify the type of wildlife involved.
- **Photos:** If possible, take photos or videos of the scene.
- **Suspect Description:** Describe the suspect as specifically as you can.

By reporting poaching and being a good witness, we can work together to keep Idaho's skies safe for these incredible birds.



TO LEARN MORE

For more information about raptors and other Idaho wildlife, contact:

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IDAHO BIRDING TRAIL

The Idaho Birding Trail is a network of over 250 premier wildlife viewing sites across the state. It provides the best viewing opportunities to see birds in Idaho. The Trail represents a collection of bird watching hotspots, diverse habitats, and a way to enjoy Idaho's rich natural heritage.

The Trail is a project of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game's Wildlife Diversity Program with support from federal, state, and local government agencies.

To find a location near you, visit idahobirdingtrail.com

