

Birds: Red-tailed Hawk

By Sally Cureton

One of the most magnificent birds in this country is the Red-tailed Hawk -a large bird of prey. One of the confusing things about hawks is that they are classified into two different groups, Accipiters and Buteos. The sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's hawk and the goshawk are Accipiters. These birds are characterized by long tails and short rounded wings. The larger hawks are Buteos, with broad wings and tails. Because Buteos soar high in the air, they are seen more than the Accipiters. Besides the red-tailed hawk, these larger hawks include red-shouldered, Swanson's and rough-legged. The red-tailed hawk is the most widespread and abundant of these. It is found across North America from Alaska and Canada to Panama.

The Red-tailed Hawk weighs between 2-4 pounds. As with most raptors (birds of prey), the female is nearly 1/3 larger than the male. It will be about 22 inches in length with a wing span up to 56 inches (almost 5 feet). These hawks will live for 10-21 years. They have immense eyes for the size of their heads, with eyesight eight times as powerful as a human's. This enables them to see their prey, small rodents and snakes, from a long distance. Once captured, prey is held in their claws, or talons which are long, curved and very sharp. The animal is killed with these talons and if too large to swallow whole is torn to bite-sized pieces.

All hawks have at least two distinct plumages, adult and immature. The Red-tailed Hawk has more than a dozen different plumages, sometimes depending on what part of the country it lives in. These colors include black, brown, gray and white in various combinations of light and dark. Also, even though it is called a red-tailed hawk, not all of them will have a red tail. However all hawks with a red tail will be a red-tailed hawk. As a result, this is one bird that can be very difficult to identify. It will typically appear white underneath with brown upper parts.

Red-tailed Hawks do not mate until they are about 3 years old. Nests are located high up in the forks of large trees and are large, flat, shallow structures made of sticks and twigs, built by both male and female. They may reuse an old nest or build a new one, perhaps using the nest of a squirrel or another hawk as a starting point. Red-tailed Hawks and great horned owls often nest and hunt in the same areas. Owls do not build nests of their own - so they often use red-tail nests. Since owl's breed earlier, they may use a hawk's nest from the previous year. When this happens, the red-tail simply builds a new one. Sometimes they may alternate use of the same nest in successive years.

The female red-tailed hawk will usually lay 2 eggs and will incubate them

for about 30 days. The nestlings grow slowly and need a lot of food and fledge in about 45 days. The immature birds may remain near their parents' territory for the remainder of the summer and into fall. Red-tail migration starts in the mid-fall, but not all migrate. Those in the far north are all migratory, those in the middle areas may move slightly south, and those in the southern states are year-round residents. There are reports of an increase of this bird in some areas since the 1960's. There is at least one report of a population increase in our area in the past two years. This is a good time in the next month or two to see one of these magnificent birds heading south.