

Wildlife Express

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Photo: Swainson's hawk by Patty Pickett

What is a Hawk?



Photo: Ferruginous hawk by CC-BY Ron McKay on Shutterstock

Hawks belong to the family Accipitridae, a large and diverse group of usually solitary birds of prey (raptors). Scientists have identified at least 235 species within this family world-wide, which include hawks, eagles, harriers, and kites. Since this family is so big, we will be focusing in on the seven species of birds in Idaho that we call hawks. I bet you recognize some of the names of hawks listed at the bottom of the page!

Hawks share several 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 human made structures. Some species 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! Many hawks will aggressively defend their nest. Intruders are often chased away by the parent birds.

Young hawks often appear different from their parents, with duller feathers and different eye colors. As they mature, their plumage and eye color gradually change to resemble those of adult hawks. For example, young accipiters have yellowish eyes that gradually turn red as they mature into adults.

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 raising young. 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.

	Accipiter	Buteo
Size	Smaller to medium-sized	Larger
Wing Shape	Short, rounded	Wide, long
Tail Shape	Long, square	Short, broad, rounded
Habitat	Forest, woodlands, suburbs	Open landscapes
Flight	Fast, agile with quick maneuvers	Soaring with broad, slow glides

Accipiter Genus

American goshawk
Cooper's hawk
Sharp-shinned hawk

Astur Genus

Cooper's hawk

Buteo Genus

Ferruginous hawk
Red-tailed hawk
Rough-legged hawk
Swainson's hawk



THE EYES SEE IT

Good eyesight is important for raptors. They can spot their food from long distances and keep it in focus until it is caught. Like most predators, raptors have eyes that face forward, just like yours. Both eyes look at something at the same time. This is called binocular vision. Raptors can also see things off to the side by using their right or left eye by itself. This is called monocular vision. You can have monocular vision by covering one eye.

Because raptors have both binocular and monocular vision, they have two well-focused side views and one well-focused front view all at the same time. Large numbers of special cells called cones are grouped together to form foveae. These foveae give the bird very sharp vision. They also let the bird see color. Raptors 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. Together, these foveae give raptors three areas of excellent vision. This means the bird has three well-focused views all at the same time. When a hawk hunts from a high perch or up in the air this is a big advantage.

Raptors are also able to focus their eyes very quickly. The lens of the eye and the shape of the eye can change very rapidly, keeping objects in focus. These changes in the eye are called “accommodation.” A sharp-shinned hawk can swoop down and grab a bird from a feeder, keeping its eyes locked on the prey from the moment it sees it until it catches it. Wow, it’s no wonder hawks have super sharp eyesight and can see up to eight times better than humans, allowing them to spot prey from miles away!

Photo: (top) Red-tailed hawk CC-BY alexander r markovic at Flickr Creative Commons Photo: (bottom) Sharp-shinned hawk CC-BY Public Domain



Winging It

When you watch a bird fly, you might think that all bird wings are the same. In fact, they are quite different. A songbird, like a robin, has different wings than a red-tailed hawk. A hawk has very different wings than a Canada goose! Different birds use their wings in different ways.

For example, hummingbirds have highly specialized wings. These tiny birds are the only ones that can fly forward, up, down, and even backwards. Their wings are designed to hover in front of flowers, allowing them to feed while staying perfectly still in the air. Have you ever seen a robin hover? No, because their wings aren't built for that type of flight. Robins have short, broad wings that are perfect for flitting through trees, but not for soaring. Birds like quail and grouse also have short, rounded wings. Their wings help them make fast, explosive take-offs to escape predators.

Hawks come with two types of wings: Accipiters have short, broad wings perfect for maneuvering through forests, while buteos have broad, rounded wings ideal for soaring over sagebrush or grasslands. Check out these pictures to see the differences in wing shape.

Wings are like nature's perfect tool, each one shaped to help a bird survive in its own unique way. Whether hovering, flitting, or soaring, birds have the wings they need to master the skies.



Hawk MIGRATION

When you hear the word migration, what kind of bird do you think of? Most of us don't think about hawks. Like it is for many songbirds and ducks, migration is important for some hawk species as well.

Similar to many migrating birds, the weather and food play a role in the start of hawk migration. Instead of migrating in flocks, most hawks migrate by themselves. They are solitary. The Swainson's hawk is an exception. They gather in preparation to migrate and then travel in big 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 fly. 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.



©Patty Pickett

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 in the fall.

This winter, 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 with lots of available food.

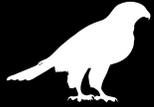


Photo: (top): Swainson's hawk by Patty Pickett

Photo: (bottom) Swainson's hawks by Patty Pickett



COMMON Idaho Hawks



**Cooper's
Hawk**
(*Astur
cooperii*)

- Lives in forested areas including neighborhoods and parks.
- Long tail and short, broad wings help this hawk move through trees to catch its prey.
- 14-15 inches tall with a 24-35-inch wingspan.
- Eats mainly birds like starlings, doves and quail but also eats small mammals, especially in the western U.S.
- Adults are blue-gray on the back with rusty bars on the chest and have red eyes. Juveniles are brown on the back with brown streaks on the chest and have yellowish-orange eyes.
- Flies with a flap-flap-glide pattern.

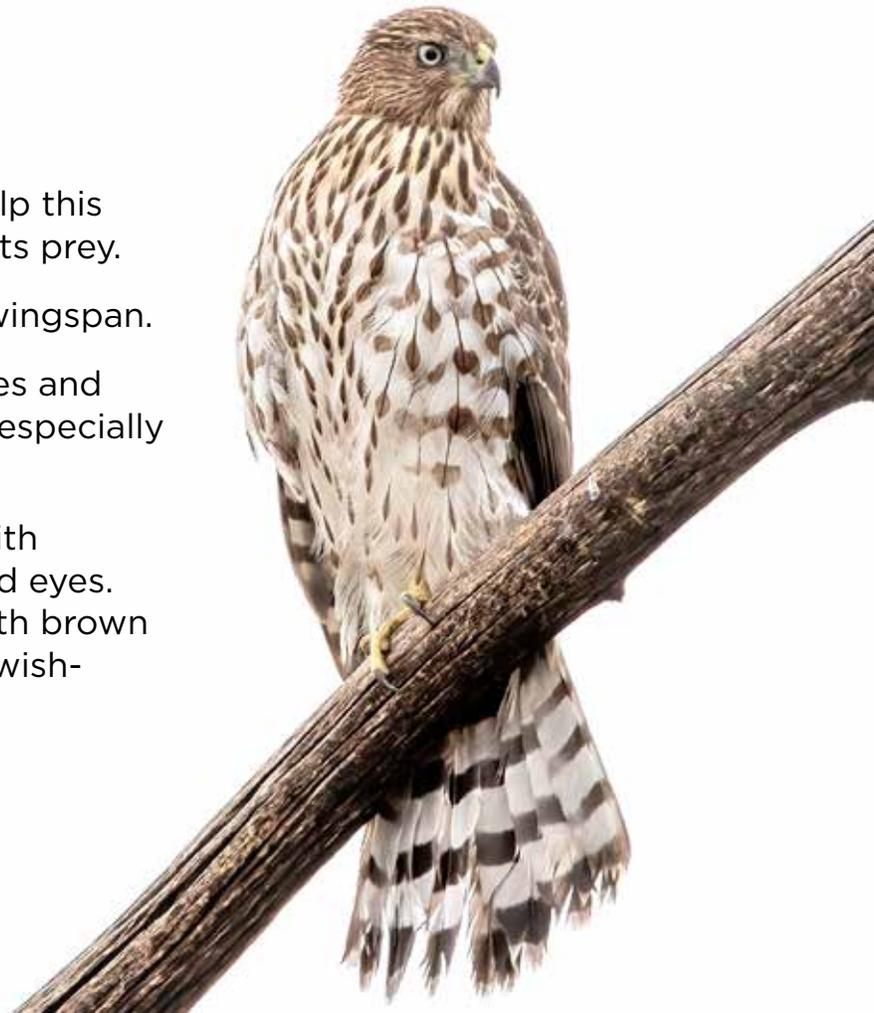


Photo: (top) Adult Cooper's hawk by Wayne Denny

Photo: (right) Juvenile Cooper's hawk by Patty Pickett



Red-tailed Hawk

(*Buteo
jamaicensis*)



- One of the most common large hawks in North America.
- Stands 19 inches tall and has a four-foot wingspan, but only weighs two to three pounds.
- Named for the adult's rusty-red tail feathers.
- Lives in open habitats with scattered trees.
- Eats small mammals like voles, mice, gophers, ground squirrels, rabbits as well as birds and snakes.
- Makes a distinctive raspy screaming call that sounds like “kee-eeeeee-arrr.”

Photo: (top) Juvenile Red-tailed hawk by Breezy Bird Photography

Photo: (left) Adult Red-tailed hawk by Mike Kauspedas

- Lives in open habitats in the western U.S.
- 19 - 22 inches tall with a wingspan just over four feet.
- Adults eat large insects, but feed nestlings small rodents, rabbits and reptiles.
- This species is social when not nesting. You might see several together in trees or along fencelines.
- Has one of the longest migrations of any American raptor. Groups can number in the thousands of birds.



**Swainson's
Hawk**
*(Buteo
swainsoni)*

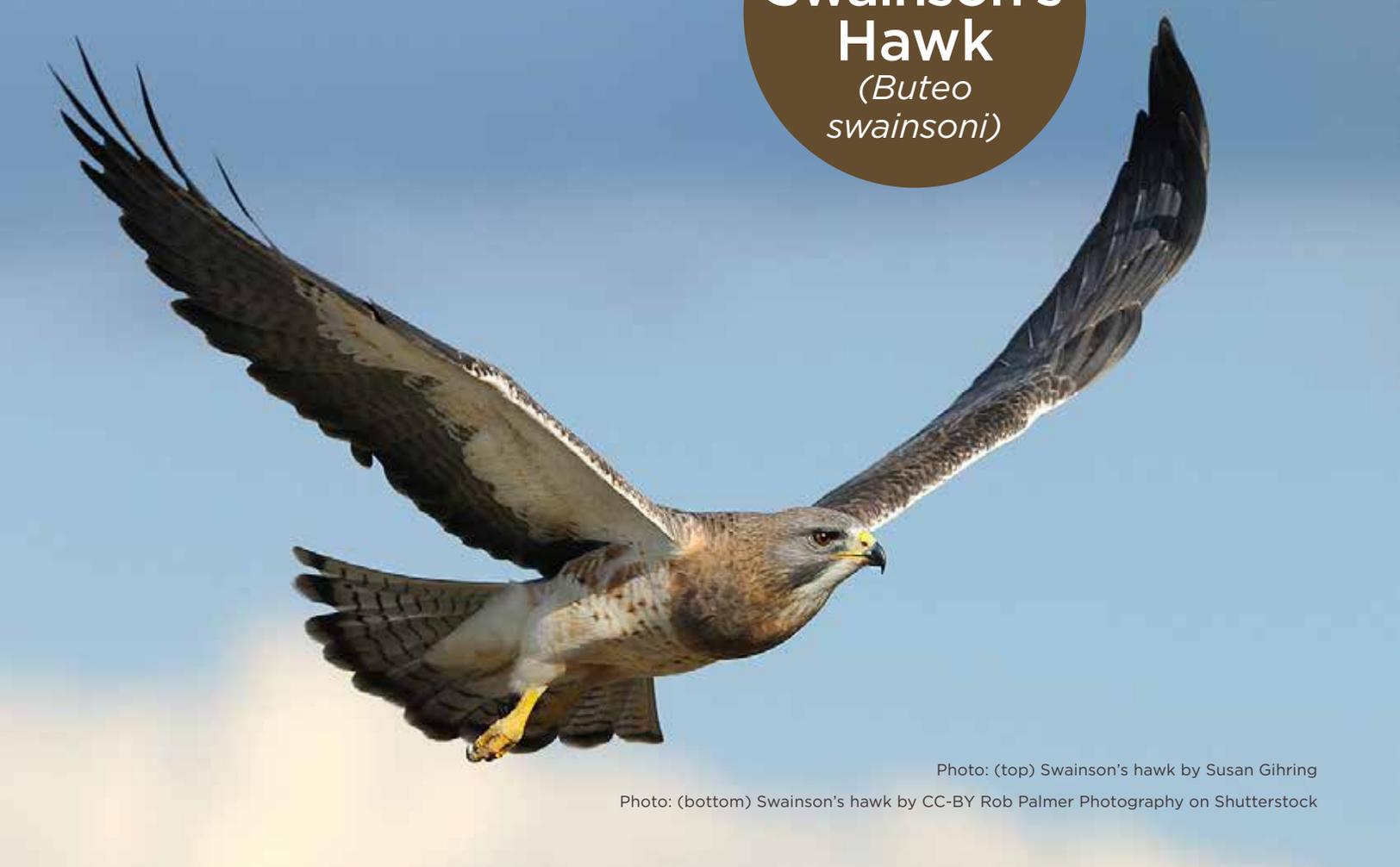


Photo: (top) Swainson's hawk by Susan Gihring

Photo: (bottom) Swainson's hawk by CC-BY Rob Palmer Photography on Shutterstock



Winter is here - what a wonderful season for outdoor exploration! A blanket of new snow makes familiar places look quite different. Noisy streams become silent under ice and snow. Animals that you rarely see can now be “seen” when you find their tracks in the snow. Cold nips your cheeks and makes you look forward to a cup of hot chocolate after being outside.

Winter activities are many. Skiing and ice skating are great ways to enjoy winter. So are sledding, snowshoeing, or ice fishing. You can still enjoy winter by just taking a walk in the snow. Build a snow fort with your friends or decorate your yard with snowmen. If it is snowing, catch some snowflakes on your mittens and use a magnifying glass to look at the beautiful crystals. Take a walk in new snow to see what animal tracks you can find. Look for bird nests in the trees. If you live near a river or lake, watch for wintering bald eagles

and ducks. Don't forget to check out the winter night sky. Cold, clear winter nights can give you some great opportunities to see the stars.

No matter what kind of winter activity you enjoy, dressing properly is very important. Wear layers that you can take off when you warm up and put back on if you feel cold. Snow pants can help you stay warm and dry. Warm boots are very important for winter fun. And don't forget a hat and mittens. Wearing a hat is one of the best ways to stay warm, no matter what you are doing. So, bundle up and head outside for some winter fun. After all, winter is a big part of every year in Idaho!

Please add some
life
to my feathers!

Art: CC-BY supercoloring.com



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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to: lori.wilson@idfg.idaho.gov or Wildlife Express, Idaho Fish and Game PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707