

Red-tailed Hawks

A red-tailed hawk soaring in a blue summer sky is a familiar and cherished sight. These birds are by far the most common and widespread of a large family of diurnal birds of prey. Family members include osprey, kites, harriers, eagles, and two large groupings of the birds we call hawks, the accipiters and buteos. Accipiters are birds of woodlands. With a long tail and short, rounded wings they are capable of quick turns and bursts of speed. They are fierce hunters with small birds as their primary food source. Our winter resident sharp-shinned hawks are an example. Buteos are the soaring hawks.



With long, broad wings, short, wide tails, and varied spacing between their primary feathers, they are well equipped for effortless flight with a minimum of flapping.

With a wingspan of four feet, the red-tailed hawk is a large bird. When not soaring, it has a habit of surveying its domain from a perch in a large tree, even near highways. Some red-tailed hawks migrate but others stay on their breeding ground year-round.

Red-tailed hawks mate for life. When two are seen close together we can assume they are mates, since they are extremely territorial birds. Courtship begins in late winter or early spring. In midmorning on a clear day look for them as they dive, fly with an undulating motion, roll over, or extend their talons in flight. All of these displays are used both to defend territory and as part of courtship.

Both male and female help build their bulky nest of sticks lined with strips of bark, evergreen sprigs, or green leaves, preferably in a tall tree. Pairs often use the same nest year after year - unless a great horned owl moves in.

The female lays two or three eggs, and both parents help incubate them. The eggs hatch in about a month. Even after fledging occurs a month and a half later the adults continue to deliver food to the young as they learn hunting skills. By fall the immature hawks are on their own and must find their own territory.

A juvenile does not acquire its characteristic red tail until the second autumn. Like many birds that show a distinct change in plumage as they mature, their eye color also changes from yellow to red-brown. Among adult red-tailed hawks there is a large variation in coloration from light, through rufous to very dark.

Red-tailed hawks prefer to hunt over open spaces though they have learned to live in cities as well. Their diet is highly adaptable, one of the major reasons for their success. Though their most common foods are rodents and rabbits, they also eat birds such as pheasants, reptiles, and insects.



The Nature Center has three red-tailed hawks on exhibit. Our male and female pair came to us from Raptor Recovery Nebraska in January, 1994. Both have lost the tip of a wing. Our third hawk is a "Harlan's" hawk - the darkest variation in red-tailed plumage. We accepted this bird from the Grand Island Zoo when it closed in 2001.