



## Red-Shouldered Hawk

*Buteo lineatus*

The red-shouldered hawk is a fairly common bird in North Carolina. While most North Carolinians cannot identify this hawk by sight, many are familiar with its two-part call. The blue jay often imitates the red-shoulder's scream, "kee-ah kee-ah."

This handsome bird of prey can live right in towns and suburbs, wherever it finds its favorite habitat—mature woods along streams and rivers and in swamps. Unfortunately for the red-shouldered, humans have cut many of these woodlands to grow crops on the rich, bottomland soils.

### History and Status

Populations of red-shouldered hawks were once much larger in North Carolina than they are today. Once they outnumbered the larger red-tailed hawk that prefers open lands mixed with woods, habitat found throughout the state today. Red-shouldered hawks still breed throughout the state along wooded rivers. One is more likely to see a red-shouldered hawk during migration and winter than during the breeding season.

### Description

The red-shouldered hawk is a type of hawk that ornithologists term "buteo." Buteos have broad wings and wide tails that are usually banded. Like other buteos, the red-shouldered hawk likes to soar, but it flaps its wings more than the red-tailed hawk. In direct flight it beats its wings several times and then glides.

The red-shouldered hawk is a medium-sized hawk, smaller

than the red-tailed hawk and larger than the broad-winged hawk. Adult red-shouldered hawks have a reddish, barred belly. One usually sees the red shoulders only when the bird perches nearby. Better field marks are the strongly barred black-and-white tail and upper wing feathers. This barring in the wing produces a translucent or light patch near the tip of the underwing. The male and female red-shouldered hawk have similar plumage, but the female is noticeably larger than the male. Other hawks show a similar size difference between the sexes.

### Habitat and Habits

The red-shouldered hawk favors stream sides with open woods and small clearings to hunt for prey. Its diet includes small mammals, frogs, snakes and grasshoppers. It often perches for long periods in the lower part of a tree canopy waiting for prey. A pair of red-shouldered hawks will use the

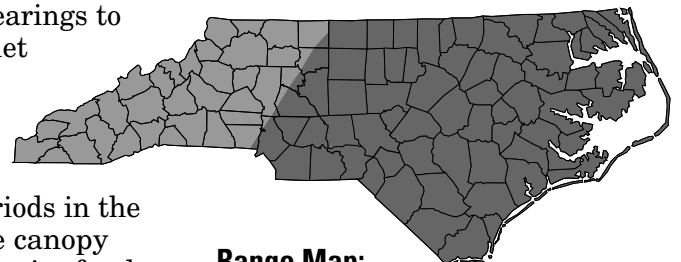


same territory of about 100 to 150 acres of suitable habitat year after year.

The pair selects a large tree for their nest, often an oak or white pine. They build the nest in a fork of the main tree trunk or where several large branches join at the trunk. The nest is made of small twigs and branches which the adults line with down, moss and other fine materials.

Red-shouldered hawks may nest as early as January in eastern North Carolina, but they often delay nesting until March or April in our foothill and mountain counties.

The female usually lays three or four eggs, but she may lay up to six. The young hatch after the hawks incubate their eggs for



Range Map:

Low  Moderate

around four and a half weeks. Since each egg is incubated as it is laid, the young do not all hatch at the same time as with some other hawks. As a result, each nest has different-sized young. The adults care for their young in the nest until they are about six weeks old. They continue to feed their young after the family has departed from the nest. The young are able to care for themselves in about eight to 10 weeks after leaving the nest. However, before they are a year old many young red-shouldered hawks die from accidents or starvation. Sometimes great-horned owls kill nestlings.

## Range and Distribution

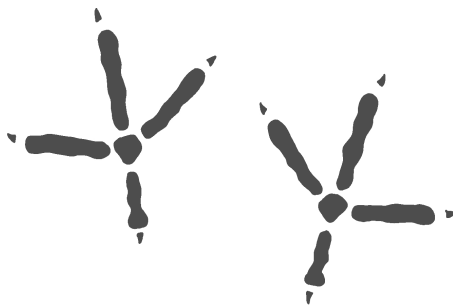
The red-shouldered hawk occurs throughout the eastern United States, west to the eastern edge of the Great Plains. It also lives in southern Canada, northeastern Mexico and in western California.

The red-shouldered hawk nests, overwinters, and migrates throughout North Carolina. It is most common in those counties with abundant bottomland and swamp forests. For this reason, the red-shoulder is most common in the eastern part of the state. One may also find this bird during the breeding season along the larger rivers in our mountain counties.

## People Interactions

The red-shouldered hawk is fairly tame. Sometimes it nests in suburban areas, giving residents an opportunity to watch nesting hawks closely. One may find the birds easily because they are fairly noisy when courting and building their nests. A pair of binoculars or a spotting scope will let you spy on the family life of this hawk without bothering it. A youngster interested in the outdoors will count this as an experience to remember.

Unfortunately, some people



think that hawks, and other predators, are harmful animals. These folks will shoot a red-shouldered hawk if they think that they can do so without getting caught. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act, a law passed by Congress, prohibits the killing of red-shouldered hawks as well as other migratory non-game birds. These hawks do not damage humans' economic interests. A pair of red-shouldered hawks wheeling and calling over a creek bottom is an unforgettable portrait of sight and sound.

## References

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## Credits

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Produced July 1993 by the Division of Conservation Education, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.  
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# WILD Facts

## RED SHOULDERED HAWK

### Classification

Class: Aves  
Order: Falconiformes

### Average Size

Length: 19 in.  
Wingspan: 40 in.  
Weight: 1.5 lbs.

### Food

Small mammals up to the size of a squirrel or small rabbit, frogs, snakes, turtles, crayfish, some small birds and insects.

### Breeding

Return to same territory year after year to breed, the same individuals may breed in a territory for many years before being replaced. Usually do not breed until 2 years old. Nest once each season.

### Young

Two to six eggs, usually three or four. Dull white or pale bluish-white, and marked with brown blotches. Female incubates eggs the most, but male also incubates. Male feeds female while incubating. Eggs hatch after about 33 days incubation. Young first fly when about 42 to 45 days old. Parents feed young for eight to 10 weeks after they fledge.

### Life Expectancy

50 to 80 percent of young die within first year. Adult mortality is about 20 to 40 percent annually.