



## Red-tailed Hawk

*Buteo jamaicensis*

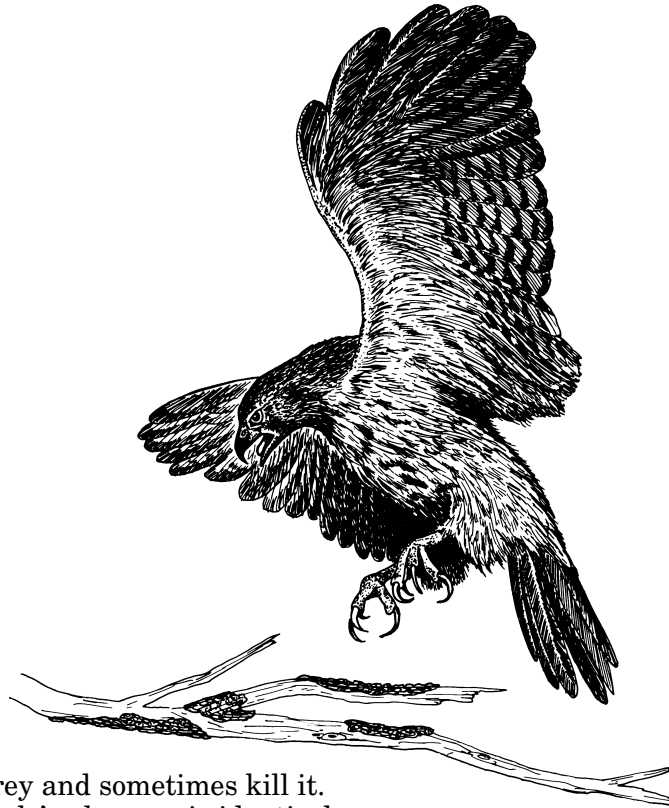
The red-tailed hawk is the most often-seen large hawk in North Carolina. It perches on telephone poles along highways and soars over open fields in search of food. A less common sight is a powerful red-tailed hawk capturing its prey with its piercing talons. The name *hawk* comes from Old German and Old English verbs meaning to *grasp* or *seize*.

### History and Status

Bounty hunters and sport hunters once shot great numbers of red-tailed hawks, contributing to a general decline in hawk populations in the early 1900s. The decline continued as habitat disappeared and, later, when pesticides like DDT caused egg-shell thinning. Since the mid-1960s, red-tail hawk populations have risen significantly in the United States and in North Carolina. Today it is a common bird and one of the most familiar hawks in the state.

### Description

The red-tailed hawk makes a striking appearance with its large, stocky body and mottled brown feathers. The adult's breast appears white with a brown belly band that looks like a wide belt. Its rust-colored tail, broad and short, distinguishes it from the smaller red-shouldered hawk. Red-tailed hawks grow to about 18 to 25 inches in length and have powerful legs and wings that span 48 inches as they soar. Its hunting adaptations are formidable: a short, hooked bill that tears flesh; long, sharp claws that



grasp prey and sometimes kill it. The female's plumage is identical to the male's, but she grows about 3 inches larger.

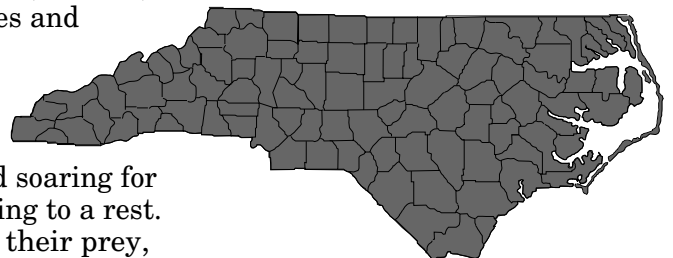
### Habitat and Habits

Red-tailed hawks like a mix of open country and deciduous forests, but they adapt to urban areas. Generally, they prefer the woods for nesting and roosting, and the fields for feeding. As day breaks, the hawks move to the woodland edge to perch and to soar. Red-tailed hawks frequently can be seen perching on telephone poles, tall trees or snags along roadsides. They sit high mainly to rest, but constantly keep watch for the slightest movement down below. To feed, they primarily soar up to 200 to 300 feet above open areas, scanning for favorite foods such as rodents, rabbits, amphibians, reptiles and insects. Often described as beautiful in flight, red-tailed hawks have been observed soaring for hours without coming to a rest.

When they spot their prey, these keen hawks snap their wings by their bodies and rocket

down at a 45-degree angle with their feet out in front and their talons, or claws, ready to grasp the prey. They rarely miss. Red-tailed hawks take one to two good meals a day this way. By evening, they return to the woods to roost, almost trading places with the great horned owl that feeds in the same open areas by night. Alert and fast, the red-tailed hawk evades many predators. But bobcats, large mammals and humans sometimes kill this bird of prey.

The woods provide nesting grounds for these large birds, as well. Secretive and solitary nesters, red-tailed hawks prefer to nest in thick, upland hardwood forests. They may use an old



**Range Map:**  
Found statewide ■

raptor nest as a base, or build a nest they may use and improve on year after year. Red-tails build a bulky nest of sticks 30 to 60 feet above the ground in the crotch of a tree, and they line it with moss, roots, grasses and other fine plant material.

Courting begins in spring. In March, male and female red-tailed hawks can be seen flying together. They swoop, dip and dive, and they call each other with sounds unlike their typical high-pitched scream.

The first eggs are laid in April. The female incubates two to four dull white eggs blotched with brown spots for about 28 days. The male feeds her on the nest and may relieve her from time to time. Both parents feed the young, which stay in the nest about six weeks.

Red-tailed hawks usually remain alone or in family groups, but they will soar together in flocks. Migrating hawks move by day, catching warm thermals high in the air.

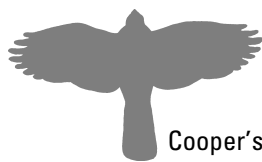
## Range and Distribution

The red-tailed hawk's range includes Alaska to Nova Scotia and south to Mexico. The red-tail is native to North Carolina and is a common permanent resident throughout the Carolinas. Often, red-tailed hawks from the north migrate to North Carolina, making this species more numerous in fall and winter than during the breeding season.

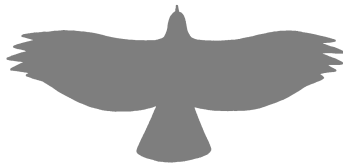
## People Interactions

Hunters and farmers once shot red-tailed hawks in great numbers because they thought the hawks regularly raided chicken coops and poultry stocks. Over the years, the hawk's reputation has changed. People realize they are mostly beneficial, eating rodents and insects that might damage crops. State and federal laws prohibit killing or harassing hawks, but they remain a target.

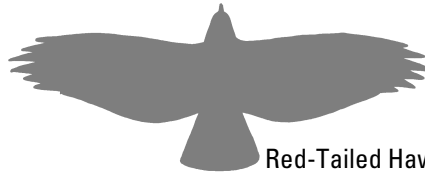
Power line installation and road construction have benefited the



Cooper's Hawk



Red-Shouldered Hawk



Red-Tailed Hawk

red-tailed hawk by creating the open habitat these birds prefer. Most birds do not adapt to habitat fragmentation, but these hawks do. They perch on telephone poles and power-line transformers, and they scan highway edges and power-line clearings for rodents. Red-tailed hawks have adapted to man, and they survive in urban areas as well as the country.

## References

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## Credits

Written by Sarah Friday.

Illustrated by J. T. Newman.

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# WILD Facts

## RED-TAILED HAWK

### Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Falconiformes

### Average Size

Length: 18 to 25 in.

### Food

Rodents make up majority of diet. It also eats reptiles, amphibians, insects and fish, but rarely poultry.

### Breeding

Adults mate in spring and remain together during nesting season.

### Young

Female lays two to four eggs, and incubates them about 28 days. One brood per year. Both parents feed young, which stay in the nest about six weeks.

### Life Expectancy

Long-lived. Ten years average.