



Red-Tailed Hawk

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



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.

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.

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 when pesticides like DDT caused eggshell 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.

Habitats & 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

Red-tailed hawks are the most often-seen hawk in North Carolina.

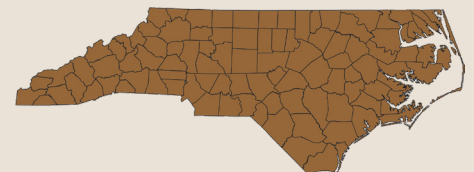


Greg Hume

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.

Range Map



■ Red-tailed Hawk Range Map

Red-Tailed Hawk

Wildlife Profiles - North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

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, great-horned owls 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 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.

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.

Human 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. Power line installation and road construction have benefited the 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.

Under federal and state law, it is illegal for anyone to injure, harass, kill or possess a red-tailed hawk or any bird of prey or any parts of a bird of prey. This includes harming or removing a nest. If you find an injured hawk, contact a [licensed wildlife rehabilitator](#).

References/More Information

- Leahy, Christopher. *The Birdwatcher's Companion* (Hill and Wang, 1982).
- Bull, John and John Farrand Jr. *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds* (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1977).
- Ehrlich, Paul and David Dobkin, Darryl Wheye. *The Birder's Handbook* (Simon & Schuster Inc., 1988).
- Potter, Eloise and James Parnell, Robert Teulings. *Birds of the Carolinas* (University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Accipitriformes

Average Size

Length - Males: 18-22 inches

Females: 18-25 inches

Wingspan- Males: 45-52 inches

Females: 32-52 inches

Weight - Males: 2-4 pounds

Females: 2½-4½ pounds

Food

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

Breeding/Young

Adults mate in spring and remain together during nesting season. Females lay 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. 10 years average.



Red-tailed hawk with chicks. (Photo: Thomas O'Neil)

Credits

Written by Sarah Friday, updated by David H. Allen, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (2018)