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BIRDS OF PREY - THE HAWKS

Birds of prey or birds that eat other animals are one of nature's wonders; they are a commonly misunderstood and persecuted group of birds. Birds of prey can be separated into two major groups: the owls which hunt at night, and the hawks which hunt during the day. Among the over 200 species of hawks are the eagles, osprey, accipiters, buteos, falcons, and kites. They range in size from the Australian eagle whose wing-span may exceed eight feet to the African little sparrowhawk which is about the size of a robin. The golden eagle is North America's largest hawk while our National Bird, the bald eagle, is second largest. The hawks possess two extraordinary features: (1) They have the most highly developed eyesight of all animals - vision which is 5-10 times better than man's. About 80% of their brain is used for vision. They can spot a mouse a quarter mile away. (2) Hawks are truly masters of the air, being the world's most skillful fliers. The now endangered peregrine falcon or duck hawk is likely the world's fastest flier, clocked at 80 mph and said to reach 180 mph during its spectacular dives. Eagles are often seen soaring high in the sky, effortlessly riding the rising air currents for hours with hardly a wing-beat.

The bald eagle, with its distinguishing white head and tail, can be identified by most people since it is our national bird. The osprey is known for its ability to dive into the water from the heights and catch live fish. The turkey vulture, with its featherless head, is most often seen soaring overhead as it searches for dead animals to feed on. Although many of the other hawks are also easy to identify, they are often incorrectly called "chicken hawks." Here are some key characteristics of some of our common hawks that will help you recognize them and appreciate their habits and role in the balance of nature.

Three common species of hawks are referred to as the buteos. The term *buteo* is the genus name of the birds. The red-tailed hawk is a large hawk with a wing-span of up to five feet and (you guessed it) a red tail. It is a shy hawk but often perches in conspicuous places like on a fence post next to a highway. The threatened red-shouldered hawk has a wing-span from 3-4 feet, brown on the back with red-brown underneath and narrow white bands on a dark tail. The broad-winged hawk is a chunky bird with about a three foot wing-span, dark brown underneath, wings silver-white with

black tips, and usually three black and two white bands on the tail. All buteos have broad wings and are often seen perched overlooking fields or open areas, or soaring overhead watching for prey. Buteos prefer mice and other rodents but also feed on rabbits, snakes, frogs and other small animals.



Falcon

A second group of hawks are the accipiters. Like buteo, the term *accipiter* is the genus name of this subgroup of hawks that are adapted to hunt in dense woods. The accipiters have short rounded wings enabling them to maneuver around trees and branches in pursuit of their prey. The three most common accipiters are: the goshawk, whose wing-span is nearly four feet, is blue-gray with a mottled white and gray underneath and a distinctive white line over each red-orange eye. Like the goshawk the threatened Cooper's hawk has a long distinctively rounded tail and has a blue-gray color pattern. However, its wings are stubby and its wing-span is usually less than three feet. Both the goshawk and the Cooper's hawk prey on medium (grouse-size) to small birds, rabbits and squirrels. The smaller sharp-shinned hawk's wing-span is 1' /2-2 feet and also has a blue-gray color pattern but it has a long slender square-tipped tail in contrast to the rounded tail of the Cooper's and goshawk. The sharp-shinned hawk feeds primarily on birds but also takes large numbers of insects such as grasshoppers and moths. The accipiters are skillful hunters that are often seen darting in the woods with rapid wingbeats interrupted by short glides.



Accipiter



Eagle

Likely due to their predatory habits, most hawks were heavily persecuted by early settlers who mistakenly thought hawks were harming animal populations. The hawks play two very important roles in the delicate balance of nature. The buteos eat large numbers of mice and other rodents. So, if these hawks are eliminated, the mice and gophers overpopulate and do increased damage such as girdling young trees and eating farmers' crops, and in extreme cases carry parasites transmitting diseases harmful to man. The accipiters, who feed largely on birds, play an important role in maintaining balanced bird populations. Like all predators they take the easiest prey to catch, thus eliminating the poorest stock, allowing the strong and healthy to reproduce. This is how natural selection for the strongest animals occurs, insuring survival of the species.



Buteo