



Red-Tailed Hawks

By Pamm, Cooper, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Red-tailed hawks, *Buteo jamaicensis*, are one of the most common and widespread hawks of North America. They get their genus name from the Buteo genus of hawks which are known for their sturdy body and broad wings. Their species name comes from the island of Jamaica, where they were first studied scientifically. Besides North America, these hawks can be found in Central America and some Caribbean islands, including Cuba and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Red-tailed hawks get their familiar name from the rusty brown tail sported by the adult hawks. It is easy to identify an adult either from the air or when perched. The underbelly is white with a broad band of dark brown horizontal streaks across the middle. The beak is short and dark, while the legs and feet are yellow. Generally, birds that are under two years old have bands of brown and white on the tail and develop the classic red tail in their third year.

Red-tails are most often found in open habitats such as roadsides, fields and power lines, which provide an excellent vantage for sighting prey. They are also frequently seen perching on light fixtures and telephone poles along roadways. They soar in slow circles as they climb skyward on thermal updrafts. You may see a bird suddenly stop or seem to hover from a great distance above the ground and then dive straight down to the ground to capture an unwitting animal.

Red-tails are generalist and opportunistic feeders, taking whatever prey presents itself. Small mammals such as voles, mice, chipmunks and red squirrels are frequent targets. They will also prey upon other birds, gray squirrels, rabbits and baby woodchucks. I have seen a juvenile red-tail try to prey on two very large carp that were trapped by debris in a swollen stream bed one spring. From its perch on a small alder situated on the stream bank just above the two fish, the young hawk would jump down upon the backs of the carp. Of course, this caused the surprised fish to flop mightily about and the hawk became unsure of what to do. It would retreat back into the tree and try again. This went on for quite a while, and I don't know if the hawk gave up or finally got its meal.

Young red-tails may be observed holding their feet in awkward or unusual positions. It almost appears as if they don't quite know what to do with them. They will practice pouncing on any object that catches their fancy, such as a small, leafy oak branch that has fallen to the ground, and they will actually seem to have captured a live specimen until you look a little closer.

Red-tail hatchlings have blue eyes at first, then yellow. As adults, their eyes are brown. Hawks can see a mouse from a height of 100 feet and there is a bony ridge above the eyes that helps block the sun.

One thing to note about buteos is that the female bird is noticeably larger than the male. Red-tail hawks mate for life and both parents are involved in feeding their young. Males feed their mate while she is sitting on the eggs, usually for 30 to 32 days. Eggs hatch a few days apart, so all fledglings are not the same size. One may be considerably delayed leaving the nest while older siblings are already able to fly. Usually in the Northeast, two or possibly three eggs will be laid. Fledglings leave the nest after 40 to 46 days after hatching. They will fly after another two or three weeks and start catching their own food 6 to 7 weeks after that.

For good information on northern birds, the University of Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the American Ornithologist's Union, and the Academy of Natural sciences worked together on a comprehensive reference, "The Birds of North America". [Cornell's lab of Ornithology](#) also has an excellent website that is well worth exploring.

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