



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, cere 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. One thing to note about buteos is that the female bird is noticeably larger than the male.



Red-tails are most often found in open habitats such as roadsides, fields, pastures 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, but they will also prey upon other birds, gray squirrels, rabbits, and baby woodchucks. They will also eat fresh carrion. I once saw a juvenile try to prey on two very large carp that were trapped by debris in a swollen stream bed. It could not overcome the thrashing of these fish and moved on to find something else to eat.

Red-tailed hawks mate for life and both parents are involved in feeding their young. Nests are made of piled sticks and are constructed in crowns of trees or other high locations that provide an excellent view of the surrounding area.

Males feed their mate while she is sitting on the eggs which hatch in 28-35 days. Eggs hatch a few days apart, so all fledglings are not the same size. one may be considerably delayed leaving the nest long after older siblings are already able to fly. Usually in the northeast, two or sometimes three eggs will be laid. Fledglings leave the nest after 40-46 days after hatching. They will fly after another two or three weeks and start catching their own food 6-7 weeks after that.

For good information on this and 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: www.allaboutbirds.org. This site has good all-around information and sound links for the bird species of North America.

If you have gardening or houseplant questions, feel free to call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at 877.486.6271, visit their web site at www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.