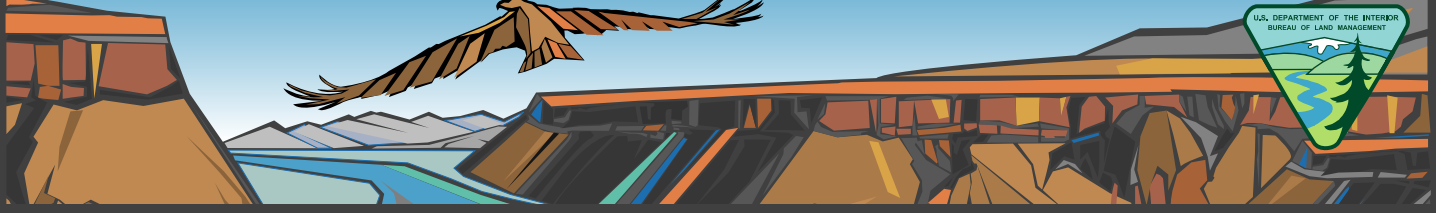


Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area



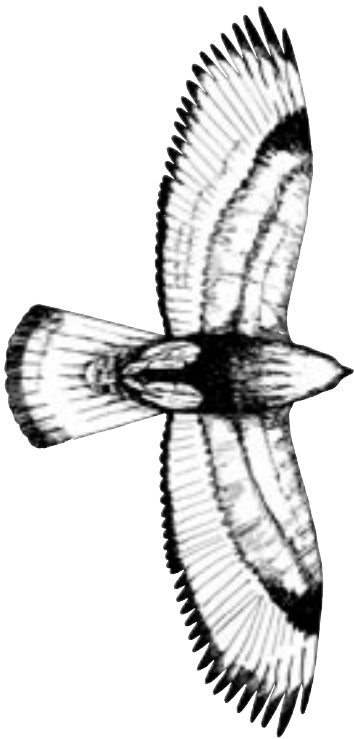
Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*)

Description/Size

Wing span: 48-56 inches

Length: 18-23 inches

Weight: 1.5-3 pounds



Rough-legged hawks have long, broad wings, a chunky body, and typically soar with their long tails fanned. They have small feet and a small beak—adaptations to arctic life. Legs are feathered to toes. These hawks exhibit a high degree of plumage variation, from extremely dark to more patterned birds often termed “light” morphs. In addition, the male, female, and juvenile birds have slightly different plumage patterns. In adults, the bill is dark, cere is orange-yellow, the eyes are dark brown, and feet and toes are bright yellow. When perched, the wing tips exceed the tail tips. Adults have black patches on the underside of the wrists and a black band on the trailing edge of their underwings. The female is slightly larger and heavier than the male and tail and belly patterns are different between the sexes. Dark morphs are dark brown (female) to black (male) except the undersides of their flight feathers are silvery. Dark males have dark tail feathers with 3-4 thin white bands near the base visible from above. Dark females have tail feathers that are dark above and silvery below with a dark terminal band. Light morphs have brown (female) to gray-brown (male) backs and wings with heavily (female) to light (male) brown markings on their whitish underparts. On males, these markings are heavier on the breast than on the belly, and there is a well-defined light U-shaped area between the breast and belly. Tails of light males have multiple dark incomplete bands and a wide, dark subterminal band. The lower half of a light female’s whitish tail is usually dusky, with one wide, black subterminal band. Juveniles of both morphs have dusky bands on the underside of the tail, a dusky band on the trailing edge of their underwings and are similar to the adult female of their morph. Their bill is blackish brown, cere is tinged green, eyes are pale brown, gray, or yellow, and feet and toes yellow tinged green. When perched, wing-tips reach tail tip.

Similar Species

Red-tailed hawk - larger-billed, relatively shorter wings, reddish tail; pale morphs show dark bar on leading edge of under wing, some dark morphs more heavily barred on under wing and tail. Ferruginous Hawk – larger; bigger wider bill with gape line well under eye; whitish comma at wrist on underside; wings more tapered and held in more of a dihedral while soaring; different tail patterns. Superficially resembles Northern Harrier and Turkey Vulture, but harrier is slimmer; longer tail; distinct white patch on upper tail-coverts and vulture is larger, lacks dark trailing border to under wing, longer wings, more uptilted flight profile and naked head.

Habitat/Range

A bird of open treeless areas - tundra, large river deltas, open fields, grasslands, shrub-steppes, marshlands, bogs, dunes and other essentially treeless areas. There is a wide separation between the summer and winter ranges. In North America, rough-legged hawks breed in the open tundra or semi-open taiga in arctic and subarctic Alaska and Canada and migrate across the boreal forest to winter in open country of southern Canada and the U.S. The greatest number winter west of the Mississippi River. Three subspecies are recognized but only one, *Buteo lagopus sancti-johannis*, occurs in North America. Alaska is considered a zone of hybridization between North American and Eurasian birds. This hawk is likely limited in distribution and numbers in many areas by the availability of suitable nesting sites.



Food/Diet

Voles and lemmings are the primary prey during breeding season but roughlegs also eat ground squirrels, hares, weasels, and birds. Birds are primarily ptarmigan, Lapland Longspurs, and American Tree Sparrows but also include a few waterfowl, shorebirds, and songbirds. The winter diet is similar to that of summer but reflects differences in prey availability. Voles, mice, and shrews make up the majority of prey items taken but small numbers of other medium-sized mammals are also taken. Few birds are eaten in winter. Carrion can be important when snow limits the availability of small mammal prey. Food-caching not reported.

Voice

Alarm call is a descending, cat-like, "kee-er" scream similar to that of the Red-tailed Hawk. During courtship, pairs give whistling sound tapering off into a hiss. After copulation, male utters whistling noises slurred downward and female gives clucklike "nar-nar". Usually silent when away from breeding areas except for the alarm call.

Behavior

The rough-legged hawk is a diurnal (daytime), and sometimes crepuscular (dusk and dawn), hunter that pursues prey from elevated perches or the air depending on availability of perches, weather, and possibly other factors. When hunting from the air, soars or uses flapping/gliding flight but periodically kites into the wind. Normally catches live prey on the ground, attacking from above in vertical or diagonal pounces. It does not pursue prey by walking, running, or hopping on ground. These hawks also rob prey from other birds. After capture, prey is carried to a nearby perch for ingestion. These hawks are complete migrants with the entire population moving from breeding grounds in the arctic/subarctic to open country in southern Canada and U.S. Usually migrate alone or in loosely aggregated flocks. When migrating, use powered flight and flapping and gliding intermittently, or soar on updrafts and thermals. During migration they are seen primarily in valleys, away from densely forested areas. Undertakes long water crossings (up to 62 miles) by either soaring in circles high out over water or using flapping and sailing flight. In level flight, The rough-legged hawk tends to utilize steady wingbeats with less of the "pump and glide" type of flight that other buteos use. They soar and glide with their wings held in a dihedral or "V". This species seems less dependent upon the use of thermals than other buteos. In soar, wings and tail spread to full extent. The rough-legged hawk is quite trusting and docile around humans, allowing close approach which can put them at some risk. Around the nest however, it is a fierce defender. Communal roosting at night, on some wintering ranges, has been documented in association with high rodent populations.



Raptor Information Sheet - Rough-legged Hawk

Reproduction/Nesting

Clutch size: 2-7 eggs
Eggs: elliptical, 2.2" x 1.8" ,
pale greenish or blue fading
to white with highly variable
blotching and streaking of
reddish brown or violet;
blotches often concentrated
around the large end.
Incubation: 28-31 days
Fledge: 5-6 weeks
Disperse: 30 days

Life Span

Conservation Status

Viewing in the NCA

Interesting Facts

Spanish name:
Ratonero calzado,
Gavilán oscurado

Sources

Bulky stick nests are built high on cliff ledges or recesses, rocky or dirt outcrops, or on eroded riverbanks with a good view of the surrounding area. Rarely nest on level ground. Where cliffs are not available, trees and occasionally man-made structures will be used. Nests are refurbished each year and can become quite large; alternate nests may be built nearby. Favored sites are likely traditional and used for many years by the same pair unless they are displaced by another raptor. Whenever possible, the highest of all potential nest sites will be chosen. Rough-legged hawks become sexually mature at 2 years and are monogamous. The pair bond is maintained at least through the breeding season. Replacement clutches are sometimes laid, particularly if the first clutch is lost before hatching. As with most arctic birds of prey, the Rough-legged hawk's productivity is closely tied to their prey. In years with high prey populations, more eggs are produced and more chicks survive to fledge. In low prey years, the predators may not breed.

Longest recorded – 17 years 9 months.

Not on the US Fish and Wildlife's Endangered or Threatened Species List. However it is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Idaho Fish & Game lists the rough-legged hawk as a protected non game species for which it is illegal to collect, harm or otherwise remove from its natural habitat. In general, it appears that the rough-legged hawk population in North America is under no immediate threat and is fairly common across its range in the Arctic and in tundra regions globally. However, as arctic petroleum reserves and other resources are developed, maintenance of appropriate habitat is critical to long term survival of this and other arctic species. Sources of mortality include: collisions with cars, and illegal shooting and trapping. Disturbance of nest sites and roosting areas can cause them to be abandoned. Development of agricultural lands may be displacing these hawks in some areas.

The rough-legged hawk is seen in the NCA from November through April.

- The scientific name comes from the Latin word *buteo* meaning buzzard, an early name for hawks and vultures, and *lagopus* comes from the Greek word *lagos* for hare and the Latin word *pes* meaning a foot.
- The common and scientific names refer to the completely feathered legs.
- Other names: Roughleg, Rough-legged Buzzard, Chicken Hawk, and Mouse Hawk.

AXIA CD ROM - Know Your Birds of Prey

Bird Banding Lab - www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/homepage/long2890.htm

Hawk Mtn Sanctuary - www.hawkmountain.org/education/images/Rough-legged%20Hawk.pdf

Idaho Fish&Game - <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/wildlife/nongame/birdspecies.cfm>

National Audubon Society The Sibley Guide to Birds

The Peregrine Fund - www.peregrinefund.org/Explore_Raptors/hawks/ruffleg.html

Birds of North America Online - http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/BNA/account/Rough-legged_Hawk/

US Fish and Wildlife Service - http://ecos.fws.gov/tess_public/servlet/gov.doi.tess_public.servlets.VipListed?code=V&listings=0#B

<http://migratorybirds.fws.gov/intrnltr/mbta/mbtandx.html#h>

Illustrations - courtesy of Alberta Sustainable Resource Development

Map - The Peregrine Fund