

Red-tailed Hawk

Raptor frequents backyards throughout North America.

BY DAVID SHAW, FAIRBANKS, ALASKA

At a Glance

SIZE: Measures 19 inches long with a wingspan of 49 inches.

ID TIPS: Most adults have red tails; colorings and markings can vary by regions, as there are several subspecies.

VOICE: Rasping, scraping scream of *cheeeeeww*. Juveniles whistle *pweee, pweee*.

NEST: Large and bulky 2 to 3 feet across, made of sticks; often in the tallest tree near

Shortly before I sat down to write this, I watched a pair of red-tailed hawks sail in for the season on a spring wind. These were the dark Harlan's red-tails that breed in the boreal forest surrounding my home in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Watching the pair reminded me of the last red-tails I had seen back in January. I was leading a birding tour at the time in the far southern edge of the species' wintering distribution, high in the mountains of western Panama.

There, I watched a stunning adult hanging nearly still in a stiff breeze rising up the forested slope. Without warning, the hawk folded its wings and fell from the blue sky.

A medium-sized bird fled across a clearing toward the safety of the nearby forest. The prey reached the forest edge at the last possible moment, forcing the red-tail to flare its wings and pitch high into the air. From 100 yards away, I could hear the wind tear through its feathers.

It occurs to me how much these two observations say about this most abundant of North American hawks. From the northern extent of the boreal forest to the tropical forests of Panama, red-tailed hawks live in an incredible range of locations. They occupy almost every conceivable habitat and eat about anything into which they can sink their talons.

Some red-tails are migratory, while others are not. Around my home in interior Alaska, the red-tails arrive in April and depart for their wintering grounds in the lower 48 by late September. In other more temperate parts of the continent, they stick around all year.

In the far south of their range, red-tails are winter visitors. For example, the hawk in Panama hunts the cloud forests and coffee plantations only during the cold northern winter. Come spring, that bird will turn its tail to the tropics and fly back north.

When it comes to food, red-tails are the consummate generalist, consuming just about everything that walks, creeps, crawls, hops, slithers or flies. I've observed them carrying dead bull snakes to nestlings in Oklahoma, eating a drake mallard in Washington and enjoying snowshoe hares here in Alaska. In short, red-tailed hawks eat what is available, be it furred, feathered or even scaled.

Personally, this species holds special significance. My first bird book was *Peterson's Field Guide to Hawks*. I received it as a gift when I was about 10, and for years, it never left my side. Long before my interests spread to other birds, I loved the red-tail, and now, many years later, I still do.

There are few things that make me happier than watching a pair of freshly arrived migrant red-tails spread their wings and spiral out of sight.

With 14 recognized subspecies, the red-tailed hawk is also incredibly diverse. The northern subspecies, Harlan's hawks, are dark and don't look much like other red-tails. On the other end of the spectrum, the Kridler's red-tail, a breeder of the northern Great Plains, is very pale.

Juvenile red-tails (below) don't have the coloration of the adults. First-year red-tails lack the red-colored tail. Instead, their tail is brown and striped.



At Right: Marnie W. Yellin; Below: Greg Buehler/Deborah Pines/Arndt



Red-tails have a wingspan of 3 to 4 feet, and the birds weigh more than 2 pounds.

To order a print of this photograph, see page 3.



the edge of a forest.
DIET: From mice and birds to frogs and snakes
FUN FACTS: Hawks hover high in the air. They have amazing binocular eyesight and can spot prey from hundreds of feet away.
BACKYARD FAVORITES: These birds love trees and will also stop by birdbaths.