



Red-Shouldered Hawk

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Andy Morffew

Red-Shouldered Hawk

(Buteo lineatus)

The red-shouldered hawk is a fairly common bird in North Carolina. While most North Carolinians cannot identify this hawk by sight, many are familiar with its two-part call. The blue jay often imitates the red-shoulder's scream, "kee-ah kee-ah." This handsome bird of prey can live right in towns and suburbs, wherever it finds its favorite habitat—mature woods along streams and rivers and in swamps.

Description

The red-shouldered hawk is a type of hawk that ornithologists term "buteo." Buteos have broad wings and wide tails that are usually banded. Like other buteos, the red-shouldered hawk likes to soar, but it flaps its wings more than the red-tailed hawk. In direct flight it beats its wings several times and then glides. The red-shouldered hawk is a medium-sized hawk, smaller than the red-tailed hawk and larger than the broad-winged hawk. Adult red-shouldered hawks have a reddish, barred belly. One usually sees the red shoulders only when the bird perches nearby. Better field marks are the strongly barred black-and-white tail and upper wing feathers. This barring in the wing produces a translucent or light patch near the tip of the underwing. The male and female red-shouldered hawk have similar plumage, but the female is noticeably larger than the male. Other hawks show a similar size difference between the sexes.

History and Status

Populations of red-shouldered hawks were once much larger in North Carolina than they are today. Once they outnumbered the larger red-tailed hawk that prefers open lands mixed with woods, habitat found throughout the state today. Red-shouldered hawks still breed throughout the state along wooded rivers. One is more likely to see a red-shouldered hawk during migration and winter than during the breeding season.

Habitats & Habits

The red-shouldered hawk favors stream sides with open woods and small clearings to hunt for prey. Its diet includes small mammals, frogs, snakes and grasshoppers. It often perches for long periods in the lower part of a tree canopy waiting for prey. A pair of red-shouldered hawks will use the same territory of about 100 to 150 acres of suitable habitat year after year. The pair selects a large tree for their nest, often an oak or white pine. They build the nest in a fork of the main tree trunk or where several large branches join at the trunk. The nest is made of small twigs and branches, which the adults line with down, moss and other fine materials.

Red-shouldered hawks are more easily heard than seen—listen for its "kee-ah kee-ah" call.

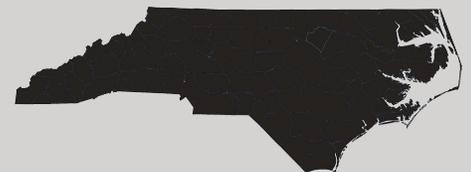


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Range and Distribution

The red-shouldered hawk occurs throughout the eastern United States, west to the eastern edge of the Great Plains. It also lives in southern Canada, northeastern Mexico and in western California. The red-shouldered hawk nests, overwinters, and migrates throughout North Carolina. It is most common in those counties with abundant bottomland and swamp forests. For this reason, the red-shoulder is most common in the eastern part of the state. One may also find this bird during the breeding season along the larger rivers in our mountain counties.

Range Map



■ Red-shouldered Hawk Range Map

Red-Shouldered Hawk

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Red-shouldered hawks may nest as early as January in eastern North Carolina, but they often delay nesting until March or April in our foothill and mountain counties.

The female usually lays three or four eggs, but she may lay up to six. The young hatch after the hawks incubate their eggs for around four and a half weeks. Since each egg is incubated as it is laid, the young do not all hatch at the same time as with some other hawks. As a result, each nest has different-sized young. The adults care for their young in the nest until they are about six weeks old. They continue to feed their young after the family has departed from the nest. The young are able to care for themselves in about eight to 10 weeks after leaving the nest. However, before they are a year old many young red-shouldered hawks die from accidents or starvation. Sometimes great-horned owls kill nestlings.

Human Interactions

Sometimes the red-shouldered hawk nests in suburban areas, giving residents an opportunity to watch nesting hawks closely. The birds are fairly noisy when courting and building their nests. A pair of binoculars will let you spy on this hawk without bothering it. A pair of red-shouldered hawks wheeling and calling over a creek bottom is an sight and sound.

The red-shouldered hawk, along with many other raptors has the unfortunate reputation of being a “chicken hawk.” As a result, hawks are sometimes shot due to this common misconception. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act, a law passed by Congress, prohibits the killing of red-shouldered hawks as well as other migratory nongame birds. These hawks do not damage economic interests. Under federal and state law, it is illegal for anyone to injure, harass, kill or possess a bird of prey or any parts of a bird of prey. This includes harming or removing a nest. If you find an injured hawk, contact a [licensed wildlife rehabilitator](#).

Red-shouldered hawks need healthy riparian forests for hunting and nesting. Avoid draining wetlands or impacting wooded stream corridors. Degraded habitat does not provide adequate nest sites or prey. Hawks may suffer from improper pesticide use when they feed on prey that has been exposed to pesticides or feed on other animals that have ingested pesticides. Limit the use of pesticides when possible and always use according to directions on the label.

References/More Information

- Bent, A. C. Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey, Part one (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1937).
- Clark, W.S., and B.K. Wheeler. A Field Guide to Hawks of North America (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987).
- Ehrlich, P.R., D.S. Dobkin, and D. Whete. The Birder's Handbook (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1988).
- Potter, E.F., J.F. Parnell and R.P. Teulings. Birds of the Carolinas (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980).

Credits

Written by Allen Boynton, updated by Chris Kelly, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Falconiformes

Average Size

Length: 19 inches

Wingspan: 40 inches

Weight: 1.5 pounds

Food

Small mammals up to the size of a squirrel or small rabbit, frogs, snakes, turtles, crayfish, some small birds and insects.

Breeding/Young

Return to same territory year after year to breed, the same individuals may breed in a territory for many years before being replaced. Usually do not breed until 2 years old. Nest once each season.

Two to six eggs, usually three or four. Dull white or pale bluish-white, and marked with brown blotches. Female incubates eggs the most, but male also incubates. Male feeds female while incubating. Eggs hatch after about 33 days incubation. Young first fly, when about 42 to 45 days old. Parents feed young for eight to 10 weeks after they fledge.

Life Expectancy

50 to 80 percent of young die within first year. Adult mortality is about 20 to 40 percent annually.



Red-shouldered hawk with chick.
(Photo: National Park Service)