

Red-shouldered Hawk *Buteo lineatus*



Folk Name: Chicken Hawk, Rabbit Hawk, Hen Hawk

Status: Resident

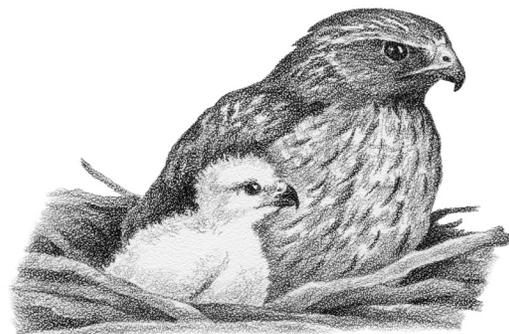
Abundance: Fairly Common

Habitat: Forests and open fields

The Red-shouldered Hawk and its relative, the Red-tailed Hawk, are our two most common resident hawks. Both are classified in the genus *Buteo*, which is a grouping of fairly large hawks with robust bodies and broad wings. The Red-shouldered Hawk is a crow-sized bird found in mature, moist woodlands and suburban forests, while the larger Red-tailed Hawk is our common roadside hawk that is seen in more open habitat. As its common name suggests, the Red-shouldered Hawk has obvious red patches on its shoulders (wing coverts). In flight, it is best recognized by the pale or translucent crescent at the base of its primaries. It is often a loud bird, and its call is well known in suburban neighborhoods where it frequently nests.

In the nineteenth century, both of these buteos were known generically by locals as “Rabbit Hawks,” and, later, they were often called “Chicken Hawks” or “Hen Hawks.” For more than a century, they were accused of robbing poultry from farmyards, and they were the target of many a farmer’s gun. In 1903, H.H. Draughton of Mingo township in North Carolina advertised his “Hawk Caller” in regional newspapers as a certified method of luring in hawks for the kill. One Carolina farmer exclaimed: “I cheerfully recommend [it] to the public and consider him a great benefactor in his invention. He called up and killed fifteen chicken hawks in one day.” The editors of *The Charlotte Observer* heartily endorsed his product.

By 1909, the notoriety of hawks had reached such a level that a bill was introduced in the North Carolina State Legislature offering a bounty on the heads of “hen hawks, blue darters, and hooting owls” and making their heads a form of legal tender that could be used to pay



a farmer’s taxes. Two decades later during the Great Depression, a contest was held in Statesville that offered a “Suit of Clothes” to the boy or man who killed the greatest number of hawks. The Iredell County game warden kept the tally of the bird heads taken and announced the winner. Thankfully, several twentieth century national and statewide “Friend of the Farmer” campaigns on behalf of raptors led to both reduced hunting pressure and an increase in public understanding of the vital role that these buteos play as natural predators—roles that include helping to remove rats, mice, rabbits, and other pests that can be harmful to farm crops.

The Red-shouldered Hawk has always been a fairly common resident of open riparian woodlands and floodplain forest throughout the Carolina Piedmont. It is almost never found in dry, upland forest habitats. It occupies the same food niche as the Barred Owl and eats crayfish, snakes, frogs, and toads from the streamside, along with the cotton rats and mice of field habitats. Like the Barred Owl, it has adapted well to living in active, growing urban and suburban forest habitats, and today many homeowners have them nesting annually right in their own backyard.



Mecklenburg County Red-shouldered Hawk. (Phil Fowler)



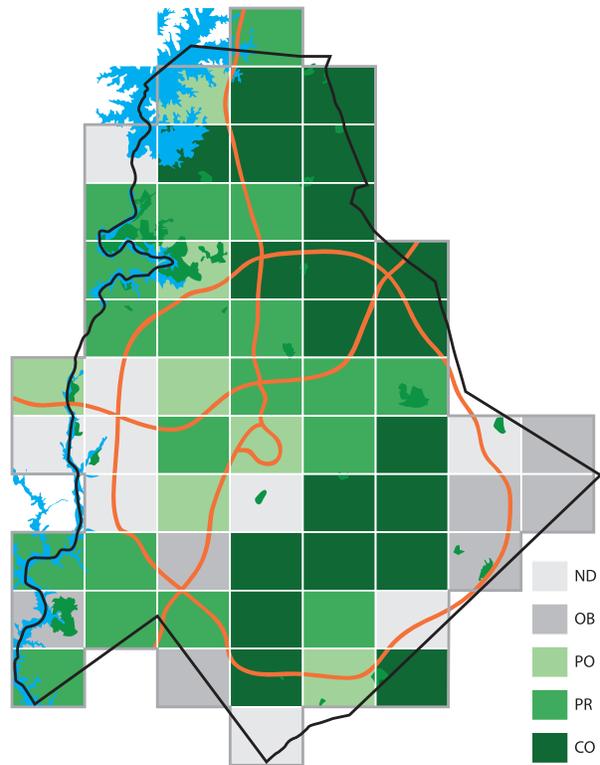
A Charlotte pair was observed nest building. (Jim Guyton)

In the late 1800s, R.B. McLaughlin observed Red-shouldered Hawks breeding in Iredell County, and Leverett Loomis noted them as “common” residents in Chester County. Numbers of Red-shoulders increase somewhat during the fall and winter as migrants descend down from the North. While birding on September 12, 1929, William McIlwaine wrote: “This afternoon we went out to Mr. H.C. Little’s ‘shack’ on the Catawba River (near the old Davidson place). We did not get started until about 5:30. As we drove out the Beatty’s Ford Road we disturbed a big red-shouldered hawk, who flew up a little, and as we passed was returning evidently to his quarry, by the roadside.” Further on, McIlwaine noted “red-shouldered hawks were quite conspicuous, soaring and screaming.” He was very surprised to see “possibly six,” and he exclaimed “[t]his must be migration.” In the Carolinas, the bulk of these migrants show up between the second week of September and the second week of October.

We have several descriptions of Red-shouldered Hawk nests from the mid-twentieth century. Maurice Stimson confirmed nesting in Statesville in 1930. On April 12, 1941, in Charlotte, Charlie Sellers found a nest of a Red-shouldered Hawk in the boughs of a sycamore tree that was growing along the bank of Brier Creek. This nest was about 40 feet up and held three eggs. Two weeks later, Elmer Brown completed a detailed nest record report for a Red-shouldered Hawk nest he found in Davidson on April 27, 1941. This nest was situated about 50 feet up in a sweetgum tree growing at the foot of a hillside, bordering a swampy creek bottom. The nest was “very shallow—little more than platform like” and was made up of large deciduous twigs mixed with some twigs of both pine and cedar. Fine twigs of pine and cedar lined the inside of the nest along with “a few clusters of vegetable down.” The nest had two eggs which were partially incubated. Five years later, Jim Layton and Binford Moon discovered a nest on April 27, 1946, “with three young, about 35 feet above the ground, in a large birch tree on Big Sugar

Creek, approximately ten miles south of Charlotte. On May 18th, the young left the nest, leaving behind them a small dead snapping turtle.”

In the twenty-first century, courtship, copulation, and nest building have been documented as early as January. Active nests have been documented from February onward. A review of over 2,000 intake records from the Carolina Raptor Center over almost a 40-year period indicated flightless young have been received for treatment between the second week of April and the first week of August, with most seen in May and June.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Widespread (PR/19, CO/20)