

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*



Folk Name: Chicken Hawk, Rabbit Hawk, Billy Hawk

Status: Resident

Abundance: Fairly Common to Common

Habitat: Forest edges and extensive open fields

The Red-tailed Hawk is our largest resident hawk, and it is one of our most conspicuous raptors. The rufous color of the adult bird's tail is best seen while the hawk is soaring in the sky with the sun shining down from above. The upper surface of this bird's tail is much richer in color than the tail appears when seen from below. The Red-tail's loud scream, a descending *kree-e-e*, is well known to rural residents throughout the region.

This bird is our ubiquitous roadside hawk which travelers often see perched on trees or poles overlooking fields and grassy areas along roads, highways, and even in major urban areas. Daily commuters in our large cities often report seeing Red-tailed Hawks perched and waiting patiently in the same spot day after day. When perched, look for this bird's dark belly band that contrasts with its white underparts.

Red-tails use their keen eyesight to watch for movement in the grass below and then quickly drop down to seize their prey. One analysis of the diet of the Red-tailed Hawk indicated 87% of their prey is comprised of rodents or rabbits. The rest is made up of a mix of reptiles, frogs, insects, and a few birds. Even during the Carolinas' peak agricultural years, studies indicated less than 4% of this powerful predator's diet was domestic chickens.

Other than rats and rabbits, what do these large predators find to eat in middle of a big city? On December



Red-tailed Hawk in flight over McDowell Nature Preserve. (Phil Fowler)



13, 2004, Larry Barden found a juvenile Red-tailed Hawk eating a Mallard duck at the pond beside Evergreen Nature Preserve in Charlotte. He wrote: "No wonder the number of Mallards on the pond has dropped from 8 to 2. The remaining pair seemed to be ignoring the hawk, so we may have 0 Mallards soon. Don't tell the neighbors!" County workers at government buildings in downtown Charlotte reported watching Red-tailed Hawks repeatedly snatching up European Starlings and taking them off to provision their nest. In addition, some city-bred Red-tailed Hawks learn to successfully hunt fast-flying pigeons.

The Red-tailed Hawk is fairly common throughout this region during breeding season, but it is more common in the winter as the winter population is enhanced by migrants that have moved south for the season. Most migrants move through the region in September and October. On January 2, 1971, a total of 16 Red-tailed Hawks were noted as a "record number" seen on a single Charlotte Christmas Bird Count. However, the record for a single day tally in Central Carolina region is a grand total of 64 Red-tailed Hawks counted on the Charlotte CBC on December 31, 1983. Today, single day counts in winter usually average fewer than 40 birds.

Two unusual color "morphs" of the Red-tailed Hawk have been found in the Central Carolina region. Specimens of both are available for examination at the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences. The first is a hawk that was initially determined to be *Buteo jamaicensis harlani* (formerly *krideri*), known either as "Krider's" Red-tailed Hawk or "Harlan's Hawk." This bird, described as being of the pale western race, was collected at Morrow Mountain State Park in Stanly County in the winter of 1974-1975. The North Carolina Bird Records

Committee readdressed this specimen record in 2009 and were unable to determine the actual subspecies. They finally voted to designate the specimen as “Inadequately Documented” allowing for further taxonomic review or future DNA analysis. The “Krider’s” subspecies has been confirmed by the NC Birds Record Committee (BRC) twice in North Carolina and has been reported in South Carolina on at least four occasions.

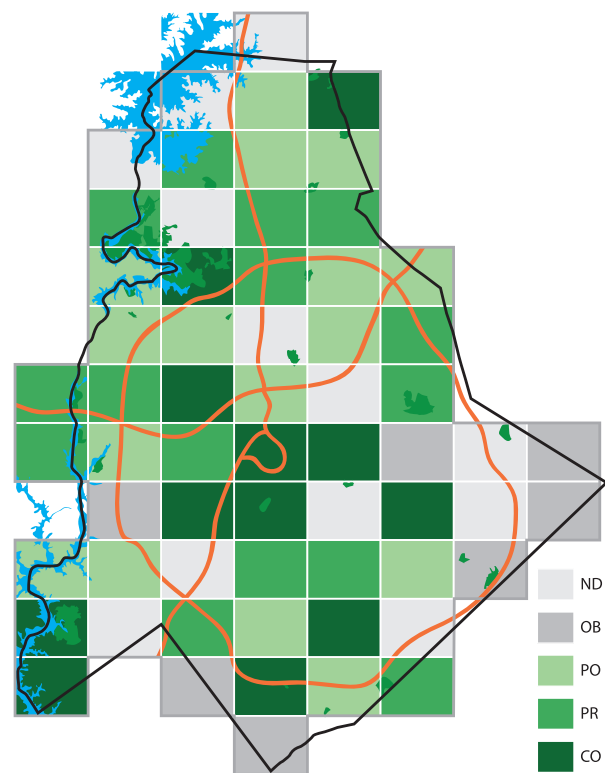
The second subspecies found in this region was described as *Buteo jamaicensis calurus* which is the common race of Red-tailed Hawk found throughout much of the western United States. This bird was an adult female collected in Mooresville in Iredell County on December 26, 1992. It was turned over to the Carolina Raptor Center for examination before being sent to the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences.

In the late 1800s, R.B. McLaughlin reported Red-tailed Hawks breeding in Statesville, Iredell County, and Leverett Loomis noted this hawk as a “common” resident bird in Chester County at that time. Frank Brown found a Red-tailed Hawk nest in southern Iredell County on May 3, 1932, with one young bird “practically ready to leave the nest.” Later, on May 19, 1932, he found a Red-tailed Hawk nest in northern Mecklenburg County 75 feet up in a pine tree. Close observation of this nest indicated that it too contained a single juvenile bird almost ready to fledge. On December 8, 1932, a Red-tailed Hawk was shot and killed in Anson County and was sent to the North Carolina State Museum “in flesh,” providing an early voucher specimen from the region.

Red-tailed Hawks are known for building nests in prominent locations in urban areas. “Pale Male” is a famous Red-tailed Hawk that nested in the center of New York City. The species also regularly nests in downtown Raleigh and Charlotte. A pair was known to nest on the edge of the I-277 corridor loop in downtown Charlotte for several consecutive years. They were often reported perched on a high-voltage transmission tower overlooking the highway like a pair of royal monarchs surveying their realm. In 2012, a pair nested in Cabarrus County at the Concord Mills Mall which is the most visited tourist attraction in the Carolinas. In this region, copulation and nest building begin as early as February and continue into March. One Mecklenburg County BBA volunteer observed nest building in a tall tree on 6 March,

only about 60 feet from an active Barred Owl nest box.

Over the years, the Carolina Raptor Center has treated thousands of Red-tailed Hawks found injured throughout the region. Many were shot, poisoned, trapped, electrocuted, or hit by cars. Most hatchlings have been received between the first week of April and early July. One male Red-tailed Hawk was found injured in southern Mecklenburg County off Johnston Road on August 17, 1999. The bird was taken to the Carolina Raptor Center where it was examined and diagnosed with head trauma and a right metacarpal fracture. The bird was treated and released in Gaston County on December 9, 1999. Seventeen years later, a North Carolina Wildlife officer found a freshly killed Red-tailed Hawk with a leg band. Upon further investigation, it turned out to be this fortunate and long-lived released raptor.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Fairly Widespread (PR/15, CO/12)