

## Rough-legged Hawk *Buteo lagopus*



**Folk Name:** “Rough-legged Buzzard,” “American Rough-legged Hawk”

**Status:** Winter Visitor

**Abundance:** Casual

**Habitat:** Open fields

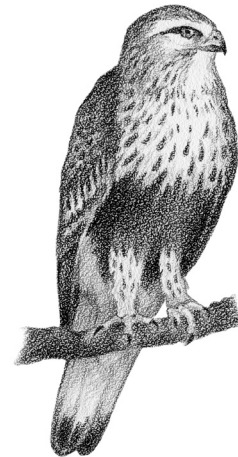
The Rough-legged Hawk is a bird of the Arctic tundra that generally winters in states to our north. This hawk is very rarely seen in the Carolinas and is only a casual visitor to our region. Carolina birder Joshua Lee provided this concise description of this rare *Buteo*:

The Rough-legged in general is easily distinguished from local buteos by the combination of flight habits and size. It soars less than the Red-tail and appears to be much more agile a-wing. If hunting, the hovering posture is spectacular and diagnostic. It is somewhat larger than either the Red-shouldered Hawk or the Marsh Hawk, and the wings appear to be longer and more slender than in the Red-tailed Hawk. It should be looked for in open areas. It is usually more active at dawn and dusk.

About a dozen Rough-legged Hawks have been reported visiting the Central Carolinas. Barrett and Vera Crook reported studying a Rough-legged Hawk at Tuckertown Reservoir on April 15, 1968. Three years later, Barrett Crook and Harold Morris reported another one over Tuckertown Reservoir on the Stanly Spring Bird Count held on April 24, 1971. These sightings lacked sufficient identification details, and both are extremely late dates for this species in North Carolina. It is possible



Rough-legged Hawk taking off at Charlotte-Douglas International Airport. (Jeff Lemons)



the observers misidentified a Red-tailed Hawk or another species.

Paul McKenzie reported a Rough-legged Hawk at the Carolina Sandhills NWR in Chesterfield County on March 12, 1975. No identification details were published. This record was not accepted as valid by McNair and Post, the authors of the *Supplement to Status and Distribution of South Carolina Birds* published in 1993. In fact, as of that year, no convincing records of this species had been accepted in South Carolina, and the bird was on the state’s provisional list.

The first record of this raptor that is accepted as valid in this region was a hawk seen by David Wright in Mecklenburg County on December 12, 1982. Wright’s report to the editor of *The Chat* lacked a written description, but was accepted for publication “because of the experience of the observer.” The bird was seen along Interstate 77 between Arrowwood Road and Carowinds Boulevard, south of Charlotte. The bird was relocated there a week later on 16 December. A month later on January 17, 1983, Faye Dunn and Joey Cochran, two UNC Charlotte graduate students studying ornithology, independently reported watching a Rough-legged Hawk near the Arrowwood Manufacturing plant. This plant was very near the original spot where David Wright observed his hawk, and it was probably the same bird.

The following year David Wright and Paul Hart “excellently described” a light-phase Rough-legged Hawk near Kings Mountain in Cleveland County on January 8, 1984. The sighting, this time received with full written details, was published in *The Chat*. Another light-phase bird was seen by both Allen Bryan and Ricky Davis along I-85 in western Davidson County on January 7–9, 1990. Four years later on February 2, 1994, a birder provided a

report of a Rough-legged Hawk from Salisbury, Rowan County, not far from the location of the previous report. However, no details of this hawk were provided.

Birders submitted reports of individual Rough-legged Hawks in Cabarrus County on January 6, 2000 and December 23, 2001. The first report was submitted by Tomm Lorenzin and Danny Swicegood from Lake Don T. Howell, and the second report was submitted by expert falconer Eric Harrold who saw the bird south of Harrisburg near the Mecklenburg County line. This sighting was later described as “an excellent local report.”

On October 4, 2009, John Scavetto photographed a raptor soaring high above the Hawk Watch monitoring site at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge. He later reviewed this photograph and realized it was something unusual.

He shared the picture with several local observers, and after several rounds of review and discussion, all agreed that it was a Rough-legged Hawk. Therefore, Scavetto’s photograph provided the first physical documentation of this species in the Central Carolinas.

One year later, near sunset on December 29, 2010, Kevin Metcalf discovered a light-phase Rough-legged Hawk foraging along the fields at the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport. It was hovering and hunting around the tarmac until it was too dark to see. Both a Short-eared Owl and a Northern Harrier were present as well. In the following days, this rare hawk was joined by a second Rough-legged Hawk. Both birds were photographed and observed many times through January 2011, and at least one remained until 3 February.