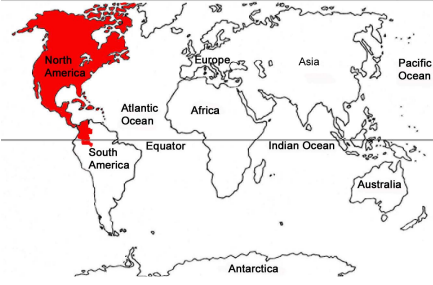


Native Range Map



Red-tailed Hawk

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Aves
Order: Falconiformes
Family: Accipitridae
Genus: *Buteo*
Species: *jamaicensis*



Photo courtesy of Lynne Panebianco

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The red-tailed hawk is typically found in grasslands or marsh habitats. It is a very adaptable bird, existing in deserts and forests, and flying at various heights above sea level. The red-tailed hawk is found throughout North America and south as far as Columbia. They move seasonally to areas of most abundant prey, and in winter many of the northern birds move south, but they are not considered to be truly migratory.
- **Exhibit Location:** Pole barn; used in demonstrations on zoo grounds

Characteristics

- Length: 18-26 inches; Wingspan: 4 feet; Weight: 2-4 pounds
The sexes look alike; females are about 33% larger than the males.
- Adult red-tailed hawks are dark brown on their backs and on top of their wings. The underside of the hawk is usually light colored with a dark bellyband, with a cinnamon wash on the neck and chest. They have a brick red colored tail that may or may not have a black bar on the end. Immature red-tailed hawks look like the adults except their tail is brown with dark bars. This species shows a great deal of individual variation in their plumage.
- They have strong, hooked beaks. Their feet have 3 toes pointed forward and 1 turned back; their claws, or talons, are long, curved and very sharp. Prey is killed with the long talons and if it is too large to be swallowed whole, it is torn into bite-sized pieces with the hawk's beak.
- Their keen vision allows them to detect prey movements at great distances.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** 21.5 years (longest known; but usually less than 2 years);
In Captivity 29.5 years

Behaviors

- The red-tailed hawk is diurnal, being active during the daytime.
- The red-tailed hawk is known for its soaring ability rather than its flying speed. It is commonly found soaring at high altitudes while using its sharp eyesight to spot the slightest movement below.
- The red-tailed hawk is an aggressive bird and forcefully defends its territory. The female is usually more aggressive around the nest, whereas the male is more aggressive when it comes to the territory boundaries.
- Adults make a call often described sounding like a steam whistle. The length and pitch of the call varies with the age, gender, and geographic region of the individual hawk. Young hawks make a soft, low "peeping" sound that deepens in tone as they age and is usually a sound of hunger.
- These hawks also communicate through body language. The body and head are in an upright position and its feathers are standing up in an aggressive posture. In submission, the head is lower and the feathers are smooth. Aerial behaviors are performed during courtship and in territorial displays.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** training

Reproduction

- Red-tailed hawks reach sexual maturity at 3 years of age.

- These hawks appear to mate for life, and will not take another mate as long as their current mate lives. The mated pair usually returns to the same nesting territory each year, and both partners will defend the nest.
- During courtship, the male and female soar together in circles, with flights lasting 10 minutes or more. Mating usually takes place following these flights.
- Their nests are made of sticks lined with bark, pine needles, corncobs, husks, and other soft plant matter. They may be found in tall trees, on cliffs, in cacti, or on man-made structures.
- Females will lay a clutch of 1-3 eggs approximately every other day. Both parents incubate the eggs for 28-35 days. Newly hatched chicks are altricial (helpless). The young fledge at 42-46 days.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** rodents, rabbits, snakes, lizards, small birds, fish, large insects, carrion
- **At the Zoo:** rats

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status** not listed; **CITES** not listed
- Federal law protects all birds of prey. The greatest threats to the red-tailed hawk are shootings, collisions with automobiles, and human interference with nesting activities. Food poisoning from eating food items containing lead shot also kills numerous red-tailed hawks yearly.
- Despite the destructive actions of humans, the red-tailed hawk is the most common and widespread hawk in North America, and is found in all lower 48 states.
- Predators: great horned owl (adults), crows, ravens and other corvids (eggs and nestlings)

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- The raspy cry of the red-tailed hawk is used in movies to represent any hawk or eagle anywhere in the world. Its call is considered to be the conventional call of any hawk or eagle, even though it is unique to the red-tailed hawk alone!
- The eyesight of a hawk is 8 times as powerful as a human's.
- The red-tail is the largest of the hawks.

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