

# Red-shouldered Hawk

*Buteo lineatus*



Red-shouldered hawks are medium-sized raptors with sharp eyes, broad strong wings and long legs. They are effective hunters, helping to maintain a balance of predators and prey in woodland and grassland areas.

*Northern Pineywoods*

# Red-shouldered Hawk

*Buteo lineatus*



## APPEARANCE

**Length:** 17 to 24 inches (43 to 61 cm)

Females are slightly larger than males.

**Wingspan:** 36 to 40 inches (91 to 101 cm)

### Distinguishing Characteristics

- Reddish shoulders, rust-colored breast with white and dark streaks
- Long, narrow and blackish-brown wings with black and white stripes on the undersides
- Long tails with narrow black and white bands and white tips
- Translucent "window" patch on each wing at base of primary feathers

## LIFE HISTORY

**Range:** Southeastern Canada and eastern United States south to central Mexico. Some are permanent residents in the eastern third of Texas.

**Diet:** Rabbits, rodents and other small mammals, as well as small birds, snakes, lizards, frogs, fish, insects and crayfish

**Predators:** Nest-raiding birds, snakes and mammals; humans

**Mating season:** Late January to June, peaking in March and early April

**Nests:** Cup-shaped and made of sticks, lined with dried leaves, strips of bark, Spanish moss, lichens, feathers and down; generally built between 20 and 60 feet (6 to 18 m) above ground

**Eggs:** Two or three (occasionally one to six), white eggs marked with brown or yellowish-brown blotches

**Incubation:** 28 to 33 days

**Chicks:** *Altricial* (born blind and helpless), but leave the nest after 39 to 45 days

**Life span:** One banded specimen lived almost 20 years.

## HABITAT

Red-shouldered hawks prefer moist woodlands, such as bottomland hardwood forests or deciduous or mixed forests bordering lakes, streams or other wetlands.

## BEHAVIOR

Red-shouldered hawks are *diurnal* (active during the day) and rest at night. They watch for prey from low perches 6 to 15 feet (2 to 4.5 m) above the ground or by soaring above fields and meadows near wooded areas. Perch sites are generally found in trees, but may also include utility poles, fence posts and hay bales. Once prey is spotted, the hawks drop directly onto it from above. The red-shouldered hawk hunts by sight and smell, but not by hearing. Nesting and hunting territories are usually 0.25 to 1 mile (0.4 to 1.61 km) in size. The birds aggressively defend these areas during the spring when eggs are in the nest. The females incubate the eggs while the males hunt for them. Once the eggs have hatched, both parents hunt. The females are larger and hunt slower prey. The males are smaller and more agile, hunting smaller and faster prey.

## NOW YOU KNOW!

- The hawk's eyes are situated to look forward. They have binocular vision, which helps them measure depth and distance—and makes the bird a precise hunter.
- Because of their wing structures, red-shouldered hawks can soar for extended periods without tiring.
- Their call is a repeated *kee-yeer*. Red-shouldered and other hawks are often used to lip-sync the cry of bald eagles in the movies and on television because their calls are more distinctive than the eagle's call.

## RED-SHOULDERED HAWKS AND PEOPLE

Federal law protects all hawks and other birds of prey, which include eagles, osprey, falcons, owls and vultures. It is illegal to harm or kill them or to own any parts of their bodies, such as talons (claws), feathers or nests. Nonetheless, humans often target hawks as potential predators of chickens and other domestic fowl.

Before its use was outlawed in the United States, red-shouldered hawks and other raptors suffered from exposure to DDT, a pesticide. The DDT would cause their eggs to have thin, breakable shells, reducing their ability to reproduce. Accidental encounters with power lines and automobiles also take a toll on hawks. In spite of these dangers, habitat loss remains the biggest threat to red-shouldered hawks.