



Crows mob a Red-tailed Hawk



A recently released patient
from Sea Biscuit Wildlife Shelter

Brunswick Wildlife Red-tailed Hawk

The Red-tailed Hawk is the hawk most folks associate with the name. They are the most visible, often seen soaring overhead and perched in treetops along highways. Red-tails are year-round residents of the Lower Cape Fear; however, they are seen more often in winter when birds from the north join our resident population.

The Eisenhower Interstate Highway System was enacted in 1956 for the benefit of Red-tailed Hawks. Just kidding...but they do enjoy hunting on the wide easements.

All kidding aside, the number of Red-tails is increasing across their range, probably due to creation of parks with sparse trees, highway and power line easements, and developments. In the west, they inhabit scrub, wide canyons, prairies, and deserts so plenty of habitat there.

The Red-tail (*Buteo jamaicensis*) belongs to the *buteo* genus of large broad-winged hawks and has the widest range among them. Red-tails may be found across all forty-nine states, Canada, and Mexico.

Their plumage is highly variable throughout their range, with sixteen recognized subspecies. They have broad, fan-shaped tails. In adults the upper surface of the tail is definitively red.

Juveniles start to develop their adult plumage in their second year. Until then, their tails are grayish brown and indistinctly banded. As they molt into adult plumage, their tail feathers will be replaced by red ones. By the time juveniles are two years old they will have their complete adult plumage.

Red-tail calls are long raspy screams, frequently given while soaring. The calls are a high-pitched “keeeeeeeer”, with an extended silence between calls.

Females are generally larger than males, possibly up to six inches in wingspan and fourteen ounces in weight; however, there is overlap and large males may be larger than small females.

Migration patterns vary with winter weather. For most, the amount of time Red-tails are away depends on temperature and amount of snow and may be only weeks in the mid-latitudes. Hawks breeding in the most northern part of their range migrate south. However, even in harsh winters with heavy snow cover some northern birds stay near their breeding territories.

Red-taileds sit on elevated perches, wait for prey, and then pounce. Their wide variety of prey includes small to medium sized mammals, birds, and snakes plus occasional insects like grasshoppers. They also may be occasionally found at the road-kill café. I wish I had a photo to show you of the Red-tailed in Arizona, flying overhead with a Black-tailed Rattlesnake in its grasp.

They have an unusual technique for hunting snakes and other shelter-based prey. Instead of a direct attack, they land on the ground between the animal and its shelter. The animal’s normal response is to run to its hole and hide. I once watched a Red-tailed Hawk running around in a field, probably trying to stay between the prey and the hole.

Red-taileds are generally monogamous. Courtship aerial displays, performed by both sexes, are spectacular and loud.

Both mates participate in nest site selection. Several nests from previous years may be visited by both and two or more nests may be renovated before the final choice. Since they breed later than Great Horned Owls, unfortunately they may find last year’s nest occupied.

Depending on latitude, eggs are laid between March and June. Both genders incubate the clutch. Incubation begins with the first egg laid and takes approximately twenty-eight to thirty-five days.

Hatchlings are born altricial. They are not well developed, require constant parental care, and remain in the nest many days after hatching. They are unable to raise their head and lay limp for several hours after hatching. Thirty days later they will be stretching their wings and exercising and will generally fledge by day forty-six.

In open wooded areas, nests are generally made near the crown of tall trees, on horizontal limbs close to the trunk. In areas with few trees, like for instance Nevada or New York City, they will nest on the edge of cliffs or tall, made-made structures. In the Arizona desert, Saguaro cacti are used for nest sites

Red-tails are often mobbed, as shown in the photo, by crows and other species including songbirds. Hawks are usually not injured and move on. “Mobbing” is a defensive behavior where birds, often of mixed species, fly at and harass predators while giving raspy mobbing calls that, in turn, attract additional mob birds.

Though the Red-tail is known by many as the "chicken hawk", they rarely kill chickens. Unfortunately, some farmers, ranchers, and hunters shoot them indiscriminately because they do not understand the economic importance of Red-tails controlling rodents and may not be aware of state and Federal laws that protect raptors.

The hawk in the photo perched in the pine is the hawk from my January article. It was being rehabilitated by Mary Ellen Rogers at Sea Biscuit Wildlife Shelter. Remember the one with the smiley faces on its blue cast? Mary Ellen released the hawk at Brunswick Town on March 11 after a three-month recovery. Woo hoo!

John Ennis

