



COMPASS

Navigating the world of birds and nature

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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2011

If there is one set of birds that can drive people to utter intensity and perhaps something resembling worship, it is the raptors. Some birders go crazy over gulls or shorebirds, but the hawk fanatics are in a class by themselves! In the extreme, these people reduce all birds to one of two types: Raptor or raptor food.

If you are new to all of this, or are still learning to tell raptors apart, it is tough to master the basics. Often the gap between the expert and the beginner can be quite wide, particularly with a group of birds that has such an intense following as hawks. You don't have to become a hawk fanatic after reading this article, but I do want to give you some tips so you can enjoy these powerful and impressive birds.

Shape and Flight Style

Because we usually see diurnal raptors—those active during the day—in flight, it's not surprising that shape and flight style are the most important ID clues—more so even than colors. If you are straining to see the red tail to identify a red-tailed hawk, you are likely overlooking a lot of information on flight and shape that should allow you to identify that bird well before you can see its tail color. (Also, keep in mind that juvenile redtails have brown tails, so the tail color isn't even reliable.)

Redtails are big-bodied hawks with moderately long wings that are



Red-tailed Hawk adult

relatively broad and somewhat rounded at the tip and with a short, broad tail. They tend to soar a lot. When they flap, the flaps are strong

ID Yourself: Hawking Advice

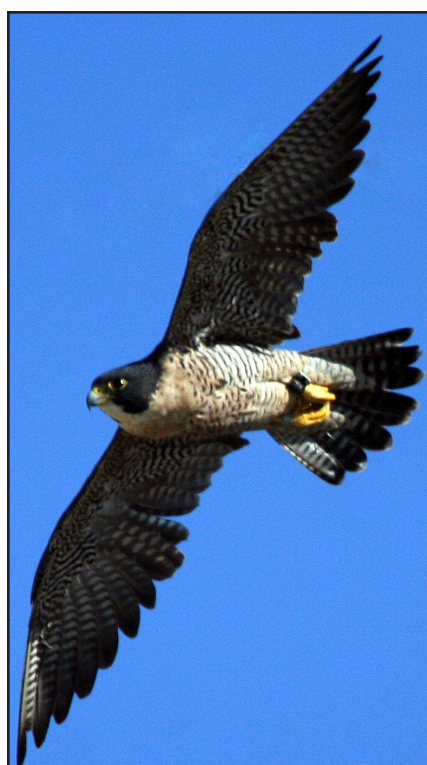
By Alvaro Jaramillo

Photos by Alvaro Jaramillo



Sharp-shinned Hawk juvenile

but not quick. In many ways the red-tailed hawk is the perfect bird to have as a reference because it is somewhat average or intermediate in many aspects of its shape. A Swainson's hawk with its long and pointed wings makes the redtail look broad and rounded winged, whereas the wide wings of a common black-hawk make the redtail look svelte! Similarly, the redtail makes a broad-winged hawk look puny, but itself looks puny next to an eagle. The redtail's intermediate "average Joe" look is worth using as a reference point for all other large raptors you see.



Peregrine Falcon

So what to look for when watching a hawk overhead? One method is to start with shape and compare it with that of your average Joe red-tailed

hawk. Look at such elements as wing length, wing width, pointedness of the wing, tail length and width, and body size.

Wing length is tricky because it affects other aspects of the wing shape. In most long-winged hawks, the outer part of the wing—the "hand" beyond the bend of the wing—is long. Most long-winged hawks also look narrow winged, and many appear to have more sharply pointed wings than their shorter-winged cousins.

Pointedness in wings varies among hawk species. It is acute in the falcons,



Swainson's Hawk juvenile

for which a pointy wing is a defining character, and also is striking in birds such as white-tailed and Mississippi kites. For example, it is more subtle

in a Swainson's hawk than on a red-tailed or red-shouldered hawk. Rather than thinking of wings as either pointed or rounded, think of pointedness and roundedness on a sliding scale, with merlin and peregrine falcon on the "pointed" extreme and Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks on the "rounded" extreme. Placing raptors you see in flight on this sliding scale is more useful than trying to decide whether the birds' wings are pointed or not.

Some raptors are oddly and thus distinctively shaped. A good example is Florida's snail kite, with its very broad wings and pinched-in tail. Apparent tail length is affected by the tail width, so birds with long and narrow tails such as northern harriers look very long tailed, whereas a short and wide tail—as in a red-tailed hawk—never really looks long. Tail length is a good differentiator within falcons. The one with the longest tail by far is the American Kestrel. Its tail gives this bird a very different shape than the darker but similarly sized merlin.

Now, how does the bird fly? Just as horses vary in gait as they move from a walk to trot, canter, and gallop, hawks have their own particular flight patterns. The three to think about are flapping flight, soaring, and gliding.

Let's start with flapping. Is your raptor making standard forceful flaps in no particular pattern perhaps, like most hawks do? Or does the wing flap look weird, as though each flap is traveling from the base of the wing out to the tip like a



Bald Eagle

break-dancer doing "the worm"? The latter is something you see in birds that have long outer hands, such as the

Continued on page 2

ID Yourself: Hawking Advice

Continued from page 1

northern harrier or turkey vulture—it just looks odd. Shorter-winged birds such as a sharp-shinned hawk tend to look snappy when they flap. The hawks in the genus *Accipiter*—sharp-shinned and Cooper’s hawks and northern goshawk—typically make quick flaps (snappiest in the small species) and then a long glide. But note that the red-shouldered hawk, which is in the genus *Buteo*, also flaps quickly and glides. This alone separates it consistently from other widespread wings.

Ask yourself if the wings are held out flat, if they are elevated in a shallow V shape, or if they are flat but curl up at the tips. How you answer this question will help you narrow down the possible species. Most hawks hold their wings pretty flat when soaring or gliding, but some hold them in a distinct V, an aerodynamic shape known as a dihedral. This wing posture is distinctive in the turkey vulture and northern harrier but shows up to a lesser extent in Swainson’s and ferruginous hawks as well. Although the bald eagle holds its wings flat, the golden eagle shows a distinct dihedral, giving it a look that can suggest a turkey vulture with a huge, pale-naped head. Raptors with dihedrals often hunt close to the ground. The dihedral is particularly useful in maintaining lift in turbulent environments, such as near ground level.

Soaring is a classic way we think of raptors—cheating gravity as they steal lift from a rising air thermal. The birds are trying to maximize the surface area of their wings and tail to get the most of the ascending air. So in a soar, the wings are extended and broadened both at the tip and the inner wing, while the tail tends to be flared and wide. This is very different from the glide, where the bird gets forward speed by a gradual, controlled fall in elevation. Here the raptor decreases drag, brings in the wings, tightens up the primaries (making the wing look more pointed), and closes the tail. When migrating hawks ride thermals up and then glide out of them to the next thermal, they change shape from broad and wide creatures to faster-moving, streamlined birds.

An extreme type of flight is the stoop, when the raptor tucks in its wings and dives. Peregrine falcons are known for their high-speed stoops, and even golden eagles stoop, but in many raptors the stoop is done with a more loosely tucked wing, not tight as in a peregrine.

Watching hawk species flap, soar, and glide at different angles is a useful thing—the more you look, the more ID clues you will absorb to help you identify the species the next time around.

Males, Females, and Immatures

As if it isn’t challenging enough that raptors are often in the air and changing their shape as they fly in different ways, there are other pitfalls. For one, males and females tend to differ in size. Generally, the females of a given



Turkey Vulture dihedral

species are larger—sometimes substantially—than the males, especially in the raptors that eat birds, such as the accipiters. The size difference is much less marked in fish-eating raptors such as osprey.

The other trick is that raptors in their first year of life, particularly buteos and eagles, are a slightly different shape than their respective adults. The juveniles have longer flight feathers than the adults, giving them a longer-winged and longer-tailed look. When you have an adult red-tailed hawk shape in mind, the young redtails can trip you up—they look longer and slimmer, with wings that perhaps suggest a ferruginous hawk. With redtails, always look for the dark “patagial mark,” the dark patch on the underside of the leading edge of the wing, as a distinctive feature.

Morphs (Not Phases)

You grew out of your various phases—or perhaps you are working through them right now—but the key is that phases have a time element. By contrast, hawks that are dark stay dark for their entire lives—they don’t grow out of a dark “phase.” It is better to refer to these color variations as morphs.

Morphs are another trick that raptors have up their sleeves. Many raptor species can come in different versions, kind of like different paint jobs on a new car—it’s the same car, but each paint color gives you a different feel. For some reason, morphs in the red-tailed and broad-winged hawks are restricted to the western parts of their ranges. Also keep in mind that morphs in North American hawks occur only in the buteos. An exception is the very rare hook-billed kite that shows up in south Texas.

Some buteos are amazingly variable, but the red-tailed hawk takes the cake—it can come in all sorts of patterns. Many hawks have a dark and a light morph, although sometimes there is a dark morph and one that is paler and more reddish brown, often referred to as a rufous morph. The key is to learn the more easily identifiable pale morphs of all the hawks, and get a handle on that shape issue; then add brown and black, and you have the dark morph. Tail patterns and colors are often useful in separating dark morphs. For example, dark-morph adult redtails do have a red tail.

Migration

Hawks are usually migratory, and they migrate in the day, making hawk migration watching a great way to spend your time. It can be truly spellbinding to sit at one spot and watch a river of hawks go overhead. Many of the good hawk-watching spots are well known, and a quick Internet search can lead you to one, preferably near where you live. Productive migration spots typically include a coast, a large lake (such as one of the Great Lakes), or north-south oriented mountains in the area. Because raptors generally do not like to cross open water, a north shore of a large lake or coast in the fall or a south shore in the spring can create a concentration point. Most hawk-watching sites are best in the fall, although those on the south shore of Lake Ontario can be superb in spring.

Another factor for hawk watching is weather, especially wind and rain. Hawks do not like flying in heavy rain, so

Continued on page 3



Snail Kite

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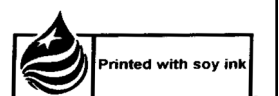
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A Jackson Park Sighting of the Rare Green-tailed Towhee

By Patricia A. Durkin



Swainson's Hawk juvenile spreadtail

avoid heading out when it is wet outside. They also do not like headwinds or strong tailwinds. In fall, the best winds are sometimes those cold northwest winds that come right after a good, strong cold front. You may need to have your mitts on in late September or October, but if you are at the right spot in those conditions you may have a memorable hawk day. Entire articles could be written on the right hawk-watching conditions, so consider this just enough to get your feet wet.

Maybe you are on your way to becoming a hawk fanatic, or perhaps not. But we all can stand to do a little gazing to the sky looking at these majestic birds. Take the opportunity to study the common raptors in your area, perhaps the American kestrel and the red-tailed hawk, and use these as comparison points. Once you have a raptor identified, just watch it until you can't see it any longer. Watch how it moves, its shape, the color on the underwings, how it opens and closes its tail.

Also just enjoy the freedom of these birds, how they ride the wind, and allow yourself to feel like a hawk. Imagine what they are seeing from up there with those ultrasensitive eyes. What is it like to rock back and forth on your dihedral? Imagine the force of impact you make as you strike a pigeon from a stoop. Why not? Let's face it. Many people become hawk fanatics because we are in awe of and also envy what these birds can do. Sure, identify them, but also step into their shoes for a while—you have permission. Being a hawk for a minute is one of life's little pleasures.

Alvaro Jaramillo's book, *New World Blackbirds: The Icterids*, describes in depth the biology and identification of this fascinating group of birds. His book, *Birds of Chile*, is now the standard field guide for that country. He has also contributed both popular and scientific articles in various publications and wrote the icterid chapter for *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior*. Alvaro also directs his own tour company which offers worldwide birding tours. If you have questions or comments about this article, Alvaro can be reached at alvaro@alvarosadventures.com.

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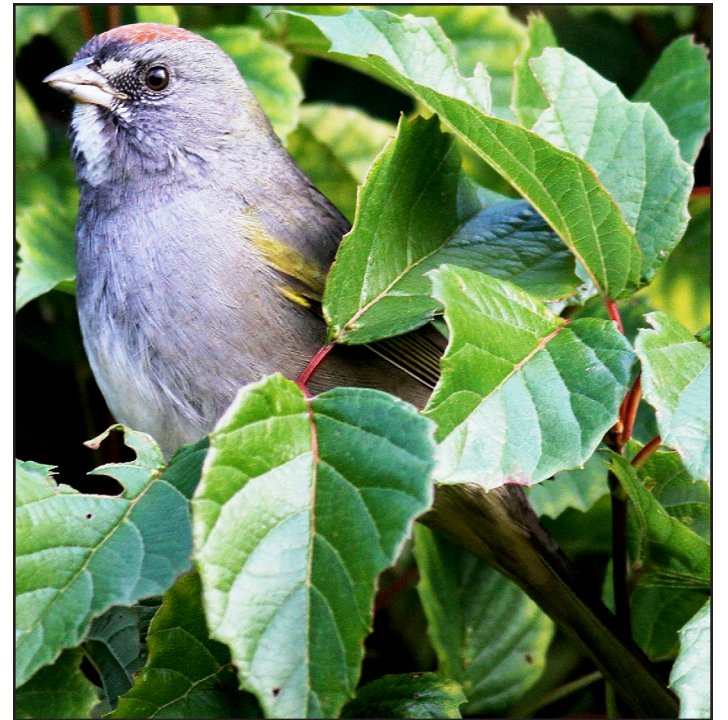
For the past several years, the Saturday morning Chicago Audubon Society Bird Walk group would occasionally meet up with a birder named Randy Shonkwiler. The meetings would take place on Wooded Island, which is in Jackson Park behind the Museum of Science & Industry, or in Bobolink Meadow, also in Jackson Park. Randy and I would look over our notebooks and share the day's sightings. Many of his finds would be included on our day's reports. Randy is a superb birder and has a great eye, ear, and memory for details. He is among a flock of birders I have termed the "Wooded Island Regulars;" that is to say, birders who call Wooded Island, Bobolink Meadow, and the harbors along the Chicago lakefront in Jackson Park their home turf.

As we were gathered behind the museum on Darrow Bridge on Saturday, October 1, 2011, a birder mentioned to me that he had met Randy earlier in Bobolink Meadow. They both saw a juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron and an American Kestrel with a morning snack in its talons. The sightings went down in my notebook.

It was a great morning for birding. The sparrows had arrived. Sixteen birders ventured onto Wooded Island to begin our mile circuit through varied habitat in search of avian wonders. Warblers were found in the Osaka Japanese Garden. The non-warblers were bunched up in the area west of the Rose Garden fence. Our juvenile (delinquent?) Cooper's Hawk had joined us in the Rose Garden, striking terror in the heart of a hiding Swainson's Thrush. Birders were calling out bird sightings right and left. We were in our glory and stayed on the Island longer than usual.

As we walked along the south shore of the East Lagoon, I greeted some birders and one of them told me that Randy had sighted a Green-tailed Towhee! A quick phone call by Randy and a rapid posting on the Yahoo birder's list serv (IBET) brought birders converging on the area at the south end of Bobolink Meadow.

We walked quickly ahead to a little island that we call Turtle Island. In a few moments, the Guest of Honor showed itself from behind a leaf. Not only that, the Green-tailed Towhee perched on a metal fence stake at the island's edge for half a minute and stared at us. He took flight and landed in a tall shrub next to us. He then flew to a willow



Green-tailed Towhee. October 1, 2011, Jackson Park. Photo by Markus Hoeckner.

tree and disappeared in the cascading leaves and branches. Thereafter it remained hidden from the searching eyes of birders who arrived later in the morning. No trace of the One Day Wonder was found the following day. How rare was this sighting of the smallest and most migratory of towhees from its breeding grounds in the western high chaparral and scrublands? The Illinois Ornithological Records Committee credited only ten other sightings of a Green-tailed Towhee in Illinois and the last one was in 2001. The only record previous to that in Chicago was on June 1, 1954 in Lincoln Park.

We can safely say that Illinois now has its eleventh confirmed sighting of the Green-tailed Towhee.

To comment on this article or if you have questions, contact Pat Durkin at pat.durkin@comcast.net.



Green-tailed Towhee. Photo by Laurie Golden.

Getting Seed??

For those who have placed a birdseed order, please mark your calendars to pick up your seed on November 12 between 9 and noon at your pre-selected location.

We look forward to seeing you! Thank you!

Reminder to our readers:

The Compass can be seen in color on our website: www.chicagoaudubon.org -- just click on the word "Compass" in the top row of links on the homepage. That will take you to our archives. Don't miss these wonderful birds in living color!

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Calendar of Events November/December 2011

Workdays and Birdwalks

Skokie Lagoons Workdays. 10:00 a.m. every second Saturday. These workdays are continuous throughout the year. Chicago Audubon sponsors regular monthly workdays at Skokie Lagoons every second Saturday of the month. Activities include buckthorn cutting, brush pile burning, and other management activities. Wear work clothes. Meet at the Tower Road parking lot, east of the lagoon bridge. For further information, please call Dave Kosnik at (847) 456-6368. Everyone is welcome!

Montrose Point Magic Hedge Stewardship Workdays to be held on the following Saturdays from 9 to noon: October 1, November 5. (Most dates are the usual 2nd Saturday of the month except where major events or holidays occur.) Volunteers are needed to help with weeding, mulching, planting native shrubs and trees. We are also establishing a prairie! Wear work clothes. For information about work dates, to sign up, and for directions, please contact David Painter: (773) 383-0721 or email at dvdpaint@yahoo.com. Everyone is welcome!

Wooded Island Birdwalks. Jackson Park. Every Wednesday at 7:00 a.m. and every Saturday at 8:00 a.m. These wonderful walks continue throughout the year up to New Year's Day. Bring binoculars, field guides, and dress for the weather. Many species are seen. Meet at Clarence Darrow Bridge, just south of Museum of Science and Industry. For details and directions, contact Pat Durkin at pat.durkin@comcast.net. Everyone is welcome!

Birding America is coming! Saturday, March 17, 2012. Be sure to mark your calendars for our 9th biennial Birding America—a day of exciting and informative workshops led by speakers who are experts in all aspects of birding from all over the country and internationally. The keynote speaker will be Dr. Erik Johnson of National Audubon. Dr. Johnson is Audubon's conservation biologist for the Gulf of Mexico and Mississippi Flyways. Details will be in the January/February issue. **Mark your calendar!**

Please watch for our Annual Appeal 2011 mailing coming in late November. This is one of our most important fundraisers of the year. All donations are extremely important to our goals and programs. We thank you for your past support and hope you will be able to help us again this year.

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