

# Raptors in Wyoming

By  
Scott Hininger  
University of Wyoming Extension  
Sheridan County  
August 24, 2015

There are officially 22 raptor species recorded in Wyoming. Some live here year-round while others visit only during the summer or winter. They can be found in all corners of the state from forested mountains to open prairies. Raptors are important components of the natural landscape, and a healthy raptor population is a good indicator of a healthy ecosystem. By feeding on rodents such as mice and rabbits or insects like grasshoppers, raptors help balance ecosystems, and there certainly has been a lot of voles and rabbits to feed on this year.

The red-tailed hawk is a year-round Wyoming resident and probably the most common raptor in the state. Red-tailed hawks are found from mountains to prairies and are one of the raptors most tolerant of human activity. They nest in pines and cottonwoods. Red-tailed hawks primarily eat rabbits and other small rodents. The red-tailed hawk is a large, bulky looking hawk. From underneath, most red-tailed hawks show a broad band of brown stripes across the belly. As the name implies, most adult red-tailed hawks have distinctive rusty-colored tails. Juvenile red-tailed hawks do not get the red tail until after their first year, but both adult and juveniles have a distinctive black patch on their shoulder easily seen in flight. This patch is not found on any other Wyoming raptor. When perched, both the belly band and red tail are often visible. The upper wings and back on the red-tail hawk tend to be more mottled with white than other Wyoming raptors.

The American kestrel is North America's smallest falcon. They are commonly seen on power lines and fences wherever there is open space. They hunt small mammals and insects, often spotting their prey while hovering. Kestrels are cavity nesters and will use old woodpecker holes, cavities in creek banks, and crevices in rock outcrops. Sometimes, they can even be enticed to nest in specially designed nest boxes. These small raptors only spend the summer in Wyoming to breed; they migrate south during winter to grasslands from the southern U.S. to Costa Rica. Like all falcons, they have a sharp-winged silhouette. Kestrels are distinctive in that they are one of the few dimorphic raptor species; that is, the female and male have different-colored plumage. The female kestrel sports bright orange-red wings, while the males are a blue-gray. Both sexes show a boldly patterned face with dark lines below the eye and an orange-red back.

The Swainson's hawk is a common raptor of the open prairie. They are found in Wyoming only in the summer and migrate more than 6,000 miles to spend winters on the grasslands of Argentina. The Swainson's hawk is one of the larger raptors (average wingspan 50 inches) in Wyoming although it tends to have a slimmer profile than many of the other large hawks. In flight, its wings tend to have a tapered look, and it often flies with its wings held at a slight upward angle. It is easily identified by its reddish-brown bib and white throat.

To identify a bird first, look at its overall size and profile. Next, look at the overall feather pattern. Since many of the raptors you'll see will be in flight, it's best to get to know them from this angle. When looking at feather patterns, start at the head and work to the tail, but, remember, you might not have long. Finally, look for some distinguishing characteristic to help separate it from other species. Learning to identify raptors takes some practice.

Wyoming's Wonderful Raptors By Tim Ludwick  
BARNYARDS & BACKYARDS 2012

*Trade or brand names used in this publication are used only for the purpose of educational information. The information given herein is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended, and no endorsement information of products by the University of Wyoming Extension is implied. Nor does it imply approval of products to the exclusion of others, which may also be suitable. The University of Wyoming is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution.*