

# TECHNICAL NOTES

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Portland, Oregon

SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE

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CONSERVATION of

## HAWKS



In Oregon

Swainson's hawk

Hawks are often misunderstood, frequently admired, and have been heavily hunted in the past as poultry and game bird killing pests and as captive birds used in the ancient art of falconry.

Since hawks are "birds of prey" some species do take poultry and game birds when available but this is far outweighed by the good they do for man in helping to control crop damaging rodents and other small mammal populations. In Oregon the group generally recognized as "hawks" includes 16 species and includes the two eagles and the turkey vulture which is often confused with hawks in flight.

There is no more thrilling sight in nature than the spectacular dive or "stoop" of a falcon on its intended prey.

All hawks are now protected by federal law and there are severe penalties for wantonly killing them. Two species, the bald eagle and the peregrine falcon, are on the National Threatened and Endangered species list.

### Identification

Hawks are sometimes difficult to identify, partly because color patterns vary greatly within the species. Males and females are usually unlike. The females usually are larger and less brightly colored.

Juveniles may take two or three years to attain their adult plumage. Dark phases are common and some individuals are almost all black. The major groups can be distinguished by their shape.



buteos



accipiters



falcons



Buteos are large broad-winged hawks with fan-shaped tails and a wingspread up to five feet. This group of Oregon hawks includes four species: red-tailed; rough legged; ferruginous; and Swanson's hawk. They are commonly observed soaring and circling above open country in search of their most common prey of rodents and small mammals.

Accipiters include the small-sized sharp-shinned hawk, the intermediate Cooper's hawk, and the goshawk, large and powerful enough to capture poultry, game birds, or rabbits. These birds have short and broad wings, and long tails. They are usually found in wooded or brushy areas. Their prey consists largely of birds and a few small mammals. Nesting is high in a tree, in woodland.

Falcons are swift, powerful birds, with long pointed wings, and long tails. Oregon members of this group are the prairie and peregrine falcons with wingspreads of 3-½ to 4 feet; and the pigeon and sparrow hawks which are about the size of a mourning dove. The sparrow hawk differs from its bird-eating relatives in many respects. It prefers a diet of insects and mice. It is one of our most common hawks. The sparrow hawk nests in old woodpecker holes, natural cavities, and bird boxes; other falcons prefer inaccessible cliffs or trees.

The marsh hawk, our only representative of a group called "harriers," is a medium-sized hawk with a long tail and a large white patch on its rump. It can be easily identified by its flight, gliding low over meadows, fields, and marshes in search of mice, ground squirrels, or an occasional bird. Marsh hawks nest on the ground, in grassland. The male is light gray; the female is brown and noticeably larger than the male.

The osprey, or fish hawk, one of the most interesting birds of prey, is often mistaken for an eagle. It is larger than the buteo hawks, but smaller than the eagles. It feeds almost entirely on fish, which it catches with a spectacular plunge into the water. Suckers and other scrap fish are taken, as well as game fish, without apparent preference. The nest, a high structure of sticks, lined with softer material, is usually conspicuously placed in a tall dead snag or on a cliff.

Golden and bald eagles are sometimes mistaken for hawks. They are our largest birds of "prey" and the endangered bald eagle is our national symbol. Bald eagles eat mostly fish and are often observed eating carrion. Golden eagles are found mostly in eastern Oregon and take a lot of small mammals including ground squirrels and rabbits for their food.

The turkey vulture is a common large black soaring scavenger that is often mistaken for hawks. These large carrion eaters migrate south during the winter.

As a group, hawks are well deserving of the protection afforded them by law. Farmers and ranchers can encourage them by cautioning hunters not to shoot at them. Since most hawks use the same nest year after year, these sites should be protected from destruction. In open country tall perching poles located near rodent infestations will encourage hawks. Establishing trees in open country will attract hawks.

Hawks hunt by day and owls hunt the same territory by night, thus providing 24-hour predation on rodent and small mammal populations.

#### References

A Field Guide to Western Birds, by Roger Tory Peterson, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961

Birds of North America: A Guide to Field Identification, by C. Robbins, B. Bruun, and H. Zim. Golden Press, Inc., 1966