



ROADSIDE RAPTORS

By Sheila McEntee

Photographs, unless otherwise noted, by Doug Jolley

Does this scene sound familiar? You're driving along a busy West Virginia interstate or winding country road, when suddenly you spy an imposing form perched on a high branch or fencepost. You note its erect posture, its calm, steady gaze. Not a crow. Certainly not a turkey. "A raptor!" you exclaim, craning your neck to see beneath the visor. But which one is it??"

Alas, the moment is fleeting, and your eyes must return to the road. You drive on, as the mystery bird fades from view.



A medium-sized raptor, the aptly named red-shouldered hawk has red patches on each shoulder. You can also distinguish it in flight by its tail, which is black with narrow, white bands.

A total of 24 raptor, or bird of prey, species can be spotted in West Virginia, including those that make their home here for all or part of the year and those that just migrate through. This group of birds includes eagles, hawks, falcons, and owls. Most raptors in our state are *diurnal*, or active mainly in the daytime. Owls, of course, are largely nocturnal raptors. But all raptors share these characteristics: a hooked beak for tearing apart prey, sharp talons for catching and carrying prey, keen eyesight, and an appetite for meat.

Some raptor species can be drawn to roadways because they are open areas where the birds can hunt for meals. “Roadways provide miles of hunting ground where raptors can find squirrels, mice, rabbits, snakes, and other food,” says Braxton County naturalist Doug Jolley.

You may see raptors perched beside or soaring above a roadway. Some you’d likely not see, like the reclusive golden eagle, which likes remote mountain ridges and lives in West Virginia only in the winter months.

“But if you’re driving on any road in West Virginia, from Wheeling to Bluefield, or from Huntington to Martinsburg, there are four raptors you’ll almost certainly see,” says Jolley, who drives long distances in the state regularly and keeps a lookout for the birds. He also keeps a camera beside him on the front seat. Jolley is frequently buffeted by the winds of semis rushing past him, as he stands on the shoulder of the highway snapping photos of the raptors he spots.

According to Jolley, the four raptors you are most likely to see are the red-tailed hawk, the red-shouldered hawk, the broad-winged hawk, and the American kestrel. The first three hawks are *buteos*, or chunky hawks with broad wings and short, wide tails. The American kestrel is a falcon. Falcons have fairly long tails and pointed wingtips.

With the wide field of possible raptors narrowed, here are some tips for identifying those mystery birds.

Red-Tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

According to many sources, the red-tailed hawk is the most commonly encountered buteo in the Northeast. “It’s the hawk people are most likely to see soaring above a farm field or perched along the interstate on a tree,” says Richard Bailey, ornithologist in the WVDNR’s Wildlife Resources Section Wildlife Diversity Unit. “They often hunt farmers’ fields and roadsides.”

At 19 to 25 inches long and with a wingspread of 46 to 58 inches, the red-tailed hawk is also the largest hawk you’ll see in West Virginia. Adults are dark brown above and white below, with brown streaks on the lower neck and a broad band of dark streaking across the

After a successful hunt, this American kestrel flies away, clutching its prey in its small but mighty talons.



white chest. The upper side of the tail is chestnut red. (Note: Immature red-tailed hawks have similar coloration to adults but the upper parts are more mottled with white, the breast is usually shining white, and the underparts are more streaked and spotted. The tail is gray or gray-brown with 6 to 10 narrow, dusky bars.)

How best to identify this bird? “For the red-tailed hawk, it’s its size,” says Bailey. “And if you see that orange on the top of the tail, it’s not going to be anything but a red-tailed hawk. If it’s perched and you can’t see the tail, you can look for a white breast and a brown spotted band that goes across its chest.”

Red-tailed hawks may soar for hours at a time, slowly turning wide circles and hardly flapping their wings. They have phenomenal eyesight and may hunt while soaring. While their main prey is rodents, they have been known to consume snakes and snatch birds and bats out of the air.

An avian work of art, the petite American kestrel is known for its beautiful coloration and markings. © Clayton Spangler

“Red-tailed hawks have really adapted to suburbia,” Jolley adds. “It’s nothing to see them around shopping centers and residential areas, open fields, and golf courses. They seem to work well with urban sprawl.” Red-tails can be more numerous in winter, with birds from the far north arriving to join the birds that live in West Virginia year round.

Red-Shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*)

This medium-sized hawk makes its home in woodlands or residential areas, often near water. “If you’re driving near a river or a creek, you might encounter a red-shouldered hawk,” Bailey says. Bailey adds that while you may not see this hawk so much on roadsides, “it’s our most vocal hawk and the one you’ll most likely hear calling.” The red-shouldered hawk’s call sounds like a plaintive “keeeeer! keeer! keeeeer!”

This hawk is 17 to 24 inches long with a wingspread of 32.5 to 50 inches. Adult birds have a brown back, and their underparts, from throat to tail and on their thighs, are barred with brown, red, and white. There is a reddish patch on each shoulder and the tail is black with narrow white bands. In addition, there are narrow, pale crescents near the wingtips that are noticeable in flight. (Note: Immature birds are similar to adults but have underparts heavily streaked with brown and little or no red shoulder patches.)

Red-shouldered hawks hunt small mammals, amphibians, and reptiles either from perches or while flying. They have a strong attachment to their nesting territory. Succeeding generations of these birds have been known to occupy an area for as long as 45 years.

Broad-Winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*)

The smallest of West Virginia’s buteos, the crow-sized broad-winged hawk resides in deep woodlands. It has a quiet demeanor and can appear quite tame, sitting calmly on a low limb watching for frogs, toads, small mammals, or other prey.

“While buteos are uncannily accurate when diving on a target from high above, they are inept at chasing down their prey,” notes Jolley. “While watching from a third-story classroom window, I once saw a broad-winged hawk land in a tree just a few feet away. It proceeded to chase a squirrel around the tree’s trunk and along some of the main branches. After nearly five minutes of this game of tag, both the hawk and the squirrel mutually agreed to pursue other activities.”

Broad-winged hawks measure 13.5 to 19 inches long and have a wingspread of 32 to 39 inches. They are chunky in appearance. Adults have dark brown upperparts and underparts barred with brown-red. Their wings are silver-white on the underside with black tips. The tail has conspicuous, broad,



The broad-winged hawk is crow-sized and can be distinguished by the broad black-and-white bands on its short, wide tail.



The red-tailed hawk is the largest and most commonly seen hawk in West Virginia. Adults' tails are chestnut red on the upper side.

black-and-white bands, usually three black and two white, about equally wide. (Immature birds have dark, more numerous and narrower dark bands in the tail that crowd out the white. The belly is white with dark vertical streaks.)

“Broad-winged hawks are less often seen along roadways, but they are frequently seen soaring overhead. Their high-pitched call is distinctive,” Bailey says. “When you see a broad-winged soaring, you’ll notice the black bands on its tail feathers.”

Migrating broad-winged hawks typically begin to appear in the Mountain State in April. Those that stay to breed in West Virginia are often active at their nests by the beginning of June. They depart for their wintering grounds in September. These hawks migrate in great flocks, which can be observed in mid- to late September at certain hawk observation points in the state (see sidebar). During fall migrations, great numbers of broad-winged hawks will rise en masse in a circular fashion high above mountain ridges. The birds are riding warm air currents to gain elevation. This visual phenomenon is known as a *kettling*.



Red shoulder patches and narrow white bands on the tail evidence the identity of this perched red-shouldered hawk.

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*)

At 9 to 12 inches long, with a wingspread of 20 to 24.5 inches, the kestrel is the smallest, as well as the most common American falcon. Its nickname, the “sparrow hawk,” is a misnomer because it does not eat sparrows and it is not a hawk.

“The kestrel is a bird of grassland habitats,” says Bailey. “If you’re driving through a woodland, you’re probably not going to see a kestrel. But if you’re in the Greenbrier Valley or the South Branch Valley, it’s pretty common to see kestrels perched on telephone wires along the road.” While perched, a kestrel will frequently raise and lower its tail. In flight, its wings are often bent and the wingtips are swept back.

Capturing a kestrel photo can be a challenging experience, notes Jolley. “When I approach with the camera, this impish hunter seems to delight in taking flight and landing 50 yards down a roadway on a post or power line. This scenario may be repeated three or four times before the kestrel flies off and I walk away in exasperation!”

Definitely photo worthy, the kestrel is one of the most colorful of all raptors. The male has a slate-blue head and wings, and a rusty-red back and tail. The female has the same warm reddish color on her wings, back, and tail. Both sexes have warm, rusty-brown spots on their pale breasts, and pairs of black, vertical slashes on the sides of their faces. Black markings directly beneath the eyes are common to all falcons. They help to diffuse reflected light, thus increasing visual acuity. For this characteristic you might call falcons the NFL players of the avian world!

The kestrel eats insects, bats, mice, birds, lizards, small snakes, and frogs, usually snatching its prey from the ground. In flight, it sometimes hovers facing into the wind, flapping and adjusting its long tail to stay in place.

This falcon nests in hollows in trees, holes in cliffs, niches in walls, and holes under gables. According to Bailey, they also take very well to nest boxes.

“Breeding kestrel populations in West Virginia appear to be declining, possibly because of limited nest cavities and/or competition for cavities with other species such as the European starling,” he says. “We encourage people with farm fields or hay fields bigger than 20 acres to put up nest boxes. That will go a long way toward helping this bird out.”

As you drive along Mountain State roads this month, peeping at the spectacular fall foliage, keep an eye out for these majestic birds. When it comes to West Virginia raptors, you’ll be on your way from mystery to mastery! 🦅

Sheila McEntee is editor of Wonderful West Virginia magazine.



Bear Rocks Preserve © Clayton Spangler

Hawks High in the Sky

What better way to enjoy a glorious fall day than to watch hawks by the hundreds migrate south to their wintering grounds? Since 1952, the Hanging Rock Observatory on Peter’s Mountain in Monroe County has been a monitoring point for hawk, eagle, falcon, and osprey migration along the birds’ eastern route. During fall migration, the broad-winged hawk is the most common bird sighted at this observation station. More than half of these hawks pass through in a five-day period surrounding September 21. For lots more information and directions, visit hangingrocktower.org.

In addition, the Bear Rocks Preserve atop Dolly Sods is a wonderful place to bring a picnic and enjoy raptor migration. Owned by The Nature Conservancy, this wilderness treasure is open to the public for hiking and nature study. To download a brochure with directions and more information, go to tinyurl.com/naturebearrocks.

Wings of Wonder

Curious about buteos, falcons, eagles, and owls? Long-time raptor rehabilitators Ron and Wendy Perrone of the Three Rivers Avian Center in Brooks in Summers County toured a number of West Virginia State Parks this summer, introducing several of their resident raptors and discussing their life ways. There’s still time to catch one of these fascinating and awe-inspiring programs!

Pipestem Resort State Park

August 30, 7:00 PM

Kanawha State Forest

September 13, 1:00 PM

Admission is free. Visit wvstateparks.com for specific program location.