

## Recognizing Raptors

A hawk circling effortlessly with its silhouette set against the blue of the sky often captures our attention, but few persons may give any thought to what species it is.

Field marks or characteristic patterns of feather colors and other traits can be easily learned to make raptor identification rather easy.

While it is not always a hard and fast rule, identification may be based partly on the habitat where the hawk is observed especially during the nesting season. For example, the aptly-named Red-shouldered Hawk likes swampy woods and woodland near bogs.

Should the rather harsh voice of a large bird be heard in woods in Canaan Valley, it might well be a Red-shoulder. The bird is identified, not only by rusty shoulders, but also by narrow bands on the tail and translucent openings in some wing feathers called "windows."

Preferring wooded slopes where forest cover is largely unbroken, is the Broad-winged Hawk. This hawk will often be seen circling above the forest canopy voicing its whistled pee-a-wee and marked with wide black and white tail bands.

The Red-tailed Hawk, rather fittingly named for its rusty tail feathers, seems to like habitat somewhere between the other two, but perhaps more in upland areas. Where the land is a patchwork of woodlots, farms and field is where to look for the Red-tail. Its rather hissing squeal will often betray its presence before the hawk is seen.

Off the east slope of Allegheny Front Red-tails should be looked for as they rise in circling flight with the tail bright in the sunlight. They nest high along the mountain ridge and range over the forest and farmland below in search of prey such as meadow mice, squirrels and snakes.

The tailoring of the land by humankind has been to the detriment of two of the hawks while beneficial to one. The destruction and drainage of swampland along with the fragmentation of forestland in much of the East has brought declines in the number of Red-shoulders and Broad-wings.

The Red-tail has increased in numbers and is found more widely than it was a few decades ago. Fortunately, the factors that have brought about raptor decline elsewhere have not been as dramatic in the Blackwater-Canaan Valley area where much habitat has remained relatively uniform for many years.

In recent decades the Goshawk has made its appearance, or perhaps reappearance, in Blackwater country and the higher Alleghenies. This fierce, largely gray hawk, may have originally been present, but disappeared with the clear-cutting of the forest and is returning after nearly a century of forest regeneration.

A threat to raptor well-being would be the proliferation of wind turbines along mountain ridges for the generation of electricity. The turbine blades could pose a special danger to hawks drifting south along the Allegheny Front during fall migration.

Devoting time to studying raptors through binoculars with a knowledge of their field marks can give an added sense of discovery to an outing in the mountains. Our world broadens when we become acquainted with creatures with whom we share the earth

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