



Birds of Barrington: RED-TAILED HAWK

The migrant birds mostly departed the Barrington area a month or two ago. A few may linger—some bluebirds, robins, perhaps even a Yellow-rumped Warbler or two. Some may be able to find enough food to sustain them through the winter, but most will leave for places where prospects for wild food are more promising.

One species that tends to live year-round in our area, favoring countryside over town, is the Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*). And winter is a prime season for spotting this member of the Buteo genus. With its breast of snow-white feathers above a darker-feathered “belt,” the Red-tailed Hawk is conspicuous on a tree perch, gathering sun above a winter field. Fluffing out its feathers to maximize warmth, the Red-tail can appear larger than it actually is.

Often the feature that gives the hawk its name, the red tail, is hard to see, especially if the bird is perched facing you. But if the hawk is aloft, soaring with wings and tail spread wide as is typical of Buteos, it periodically will reveal the red—or, more accurately, chestnut—hue of its tail feathers when it banks.

Juveniles, however, do not sport the red tail


until they are three or four years old. Like most raptors, they have adolescent plumage that differentiates them from adults. The tail is brown and banded and the breast feathers are streaked.

Red-tailed Hawks occur most commonly in open countryside where they can cast their keen gaze on fields for careless voles and mice that constitute much of their diet. They will pounce on the rodents with their talons and carry them to a tree branch to consume.

But these large hawks inhabit cities too, where squirrels and rats are abundant. Pale Male, a Red-tailed Hawk that nested for years above an arched window of a swank apartment building on Fifth Avenue in New York City, has been immortalized in both book (“Red-Tails in Love,” by Marie Winn) and film (“The Legend of Pale Male” by Frederic Lilien).

Just last month in Chicago, a group of birders that meets the first Tuesday of every month to bird the lakefront near McCormick Bird Sanctuary, was treated to close-up views of a young Red-tailed Hawk in flight, perched, and hovering over the roof-top garden on the parking garage. We were able to study every feather and watch its eyes as they darted in multiple directions for a glimpse

of rodents or rabbits. Red-tailed Hawks may be our most common raptor, but that experience was uncommon and special.

It will not be long—March or April—before Red-tailed Hawks begin building nests to raise new broods. They typically use large twigs and branches to construct round platforms with an inner depression for the one to three eggs. Mostly it's the larger female that incubates the eggs and shelters the young which usually hatch in late April or early May. But that part of the annual cycle is yet to come. For now, at the onset of winter, let your eyes scan tree lines for Red-tailed Hawks facing the sun, and the skies for the hawks as they soar in search of prey. 



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