



Oregon Sea Grant Extension
Sustainable Tourism &
Outdoor Recreation Program

Interpretative Fact Sheet

Red-Tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)



The following short article is from the [Oregon Coast 101 Species](#) collection used by the Guide and Outfitter Recognized Professional (GORP) training program. These articles are intended to provide interesting facts you can share with your clientele and add value to your services.

An Interpretive Fact Sheet has been written about each species. We are currently uploading these blogs and creating the links.

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Tourism and Business Development College of Business,
Oregon State University Extension - Oregon Sea Grant at
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Guide and Outfitter Recognized Professional Program
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Red-Tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

 tourism.oregonstate.edu/red-tailed-hawk-buteo-jamaicensis/

By colliiek2

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Sky Dancer

Sitting on a lonely fence post.
Staring down in silence.
Patient. Hunting.

Focus attack to prey.
Feet outstretched; talons sharp.
Killing. Surviving.

Dangling legs and sharp talons.
The sky dance has begun.
Touching. Singing.

Climbing high to plunge.
Cartwheel dances in the air.
Thriving. Red-tailed hawk.

Red-tailed hawks are one of the most common raptors found across the U.S., northern Canada, and far south into Panama. Go for a ride and look for them hunting atop telephone poles, fence posts, trees—anywhere they can watch for prey and swoop silently.



Red-tailed hawk (royalty free image courtesy Unsplash)

Size

Adult female Red-tails are slightly larger than the males both in length (26 versus 24 inches), weight (just under four pounds versus under three), with a similar size difference in the over four-foot wingspans.

These are medium sized raptors are the largest in their genus (*Buteo*) with robust bodies; thick, broad wings; and relatively short, broad tails. The reddish, orange tail color is unique among North American hawks.

Just for comparison, a similar-sized dog could weigh 10 times what an average Red-tail might.

Color

Coloration will vary greatly but most adults have a dark brown upper head that almost looks like a hood. Feather coloration creates an imperfect “V” shape on its back. From below the bird is a light-buff orange.

Range and Habitat

Red-tail hawks are considered an American native based on fossil and current distribution studies. Some, but not all, of the birds will migrate, typically going north into Canada and Alaska for breeding.

This raptor is one of the most broadly distributed birds in the U.S. The large, year-around range for non-breeders covers the entire contiguous U.S. with no substantial gaps.

Red-tails have become habituated to almost any habitat in North and Central America. This could include tropical rainforests, to deserts and grasslands, to woodlands. Some are even found in urban areas.

In every case, they will be looking for high nesting and perching sites. Based on the area, ‘high’ may be a shrub or fence post, tall conifer, or telephone pole.



Red-tailed hawk (courtesy of ODFW)

Hunting

A high perch gives the birds an advantage when hunting. Not only are they able to get a great view, but they are able to jump into an easy soar or quickly swoop down on prey almost silently. Minimizing wing flaps help to conserve energy which may be needed to get their prey back to the nest.

These carnivorous hawks are highly opportunistic feeders. It is not hard to imagine them taking small mammals, reptiles, fish, amphibians, birds, and invertebrates.

Let your imagination run a little wild. They will also take (or try at least) much larger prey carrying up to about five pounds in a load. Larger prey would be dismantled, temporarily hidden, while pieces are taken to the nest.

Remains of larger prey (such as armadillos, lambs, pigs, deer, sheep, and horses) have been found in nest sites. There are also stories of juveniles unsuccessfully trying to take adult wild turkeys and overwintering pairs hunting together. Amazing!

Courtship

This bird has a great courtship process that can include daring ‘sky dances’ for and with their mates. These dances occur on the edge of the pair’s territory suggesting that it is also a way to designate territory limits.

Human Interaction

Red-tailed hawks are more social than other raptors and can be tamed and trained for hunting. The sport of Falconry was used in 2000 B.C. and is still practiced today. For more information see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Falconry>.

Note all parts of this bird are protected and regulated like eagles.

The long-term interaction with humans has created a rich record of data and images for this bird. More than a single blog could ever hold. Consider taking a little time to learn more about this amazing bird—you will be glad you did!

REFERENCES:

- Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife, raptors (<https://myodfw.com/wildlife-viewing/species/raptors>)
- All about birds, Red-tailed hawk (https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Red-tailed_Hawk/)
- Ebird, Red-tailed hawk (<https://ebird.org/species/rethaw>)
- Wikipedia, Red-tailed hawk (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red-tailed_hawk)