

THE

# SOARING

RED-TAILED HAWK



MASTERS OF THE WIND,  
REDTAILS HAVE ADAPTED WELL  
TO HUMAN ENVIRONMENTS

BY  
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**N**amed for its beautiful brick-red tail and recognized by its large, stocky shape, the red-tailed hawk is the classic *Buteo*: the group of hawks noted for their broad, roundish wings and a relatively short, wide tail – and for their mastery of soaring. The “redtail” is the largest of the *Buteos* that we see in New Hampshire; others include the broad-winged, red-shouldered and rough-legged hawks.

Redtails excel at soaring. They master the wind, flying in slow, wide circles, their four-foot wingspan slightly upturned. When they do flap their wings, their muscular wing beat is slow, strong and deliberate. The call of an adult red-tailed hawk is a harsh descending scream, kee-eeee-arr, that lasts two to three seconds and is often heard when the bird is soaring.

### *Hawk Watcher*

Hawks have a passionate following. In the mid-1990s, Robert Vallieres, a disabled veteran of the first Gulf War, was casting about for a focus when he joined a New Hampshire Audubon birding trip to the White Mountains. While a biologist was pointing out various small warblers, Vallieres realized he was looking at something very different through his binoculars: he spotted a peregrine falcon tearing apart a yellow-shafted flicker. That trip spurred him on to a love of birds, especially raptors. He soon became an indispensable volunteer for Chris Martin, the raptor biologist at New Hampshire Audubon.

In addition to monitoring peregrine falcon nests in the state, Vallieres watches the red-tailed hawks that nest along I-93 in Concord. Vallieres and I met in a parking lot off Exit 16, the same spot where he saw his first red-tail years ago, before the site was paved over. We sat on the tailgate of his orange truck, facing the morning sun. In a calm voice, Vallieres related his observations of several pairs of nesting redtails in Concord. As we talked, he noted a mockingbird in a nearby tree that was imitating a red-tailed hawk call. Then he set up his spotting scope to show me an active redtail nest in a tall pine across the highway.

### *Bird of the Open Country*

The red-tailed hawk is a bird of open country, of deserts, fields, roadsides, pastures, parks and open woodlands – places where it can hunt for rodents and build a large stick nest in a tree. It has

adapted well to human environments, including the habitats along our highways, where you can often see hawks sitting in a tree, on a telephone pole, or in the roadside grass. The red-tailed hawk's

propensity to nest or feed along major highways can sometimes lead to injury or death. Vallieres' observations of nesting redtails and his keen interest in raptors led him to caring for injured birds of prey at Audubon's McLane Center. The first bird in his care was a redtail.

There are at least 14 subspecies of the red-tailed hawk, *Buteo jamaicensis*, which is found throughout North America, Central America and the West Indies. The subspecies vary in their breeding and wintering ranges; color varies from dark to light. Adult red-tailed hawks seen in New Hampshire typically have a dark brown back and head and a whitish chest with a brown speckled belly band. The tail is a rich brick red above and pale pink below. Juvenile birds have a brownish tail with dark bars.

Redtails mostly hunt from perches, watching for movement at the woodland edge or in grassy meadows below. Prey includes voles, mice, rats, rabbits, chipmunks, and squirrels and sometimes snakes, frogs, insects, pigeons and other birds – most anything smaller than a woodchuck. They also feed on carrion. A red-tailed hawk can hover like a kite

in strong wind and swoop down to catch an unsuspecting meadow vole. A mated pair will sometimes hunt together, working in tandem to catch a squirrel or other prey.

### *Nesting Pairs*

Red-tailed hawks mate for life; the pair take turns incubating the eggs and feeding the young. They aggressively defend their territory; the female stays closer to the nest, while the male patrols the territorial boundaries. On clear days, they soar over their territory with a keen eye toward potential intruders, such as other hawks and eagles. The size of the territory ranges from 80 to 200 acres, depending on the availability of food, perches and nest sites.



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*The red-tailed hawk hunts mostly from perches, its sharp eyes watching for movement below. In urban areas, a streetlamp offers a good vantage point.*





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## RED-TAILED HAWK AT A GLANCE

- Large, heavy-bodied hawk
- Rich dark-brown back and head with patches of white speckling on back
- Long, broad, rounded wings, with bulging secondary feathers
- Whitish breast with belly band of dark streaks or splotches
- Upperside of tail is red; pale pink below



- Leading edge of the wing between the shoulder and wrist shows a dark bar
- Juvenile has narrower and paler wings, whiter breast, and relatively longer gray-brown tail with dark bars
- Soars in wide, slow circles with wings in slight upturn
- Female is 20-25% heavier than the male

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*An effective predator, the red-tailed hawk preys on small mammals including gray squirrels (above). The nest of a redtail is large – three feet across – and placed high in a tree. The pair will mate for life. Fledglings (below) may rely on their parents for another ten weeks as they hone their hunting skills.*



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Courting redtails put on an impressive aerial display. The pair soars in wide circles high in the air. From there, the male goes into a steep dive, then soars up again at a steep angle, and repeats this several times. After one final steep swoop upward, he approaches the female from above with legs extended and touches her briefly. Sometimes they chase and swoop at each other with legs extended, and sometimes they lock talons, fall in spirals toward the ground, then let go and pull out of the dive.

Together, the male and female red-tailed hawks spend a week or less building a new nest, or freshening up an old one. The large stick nest – about three feet high and three feet across – is placed high in a tree, usually with a good view of the surrounding landscape. Urban-dwelling redtail pairs increasingly build their stick nests on

buildings. The nest is lined with bark strips, pine needles and other soft plant material. The female lays one to five eggs in April. The eggs hatch within a month or so, and six weeks later, the young fledge; ten weeks after leaving the nest, they are on their own.

Back at Exit 16, Vallieres drove closer to the nest site to give us a better view. He urged me to observe the birds with an open mind. With patience and attention to detail, you can tell whether the birds are on eggs or feeding young. At the nest site, we saw an adult sitting low in the nest and a second adult visit the nest, suggesting that the birds might still be sitting on eggs. While we were watching the hawk nest, a sub-adult bald eagle soared overhead. “Oh my, this is awesome,” exclaimed Vallieres. It was indeed a glorious day to be outside, even a stone’s throw away from an Interstate.



## On the Gauntlet

Redtails have another claim to fame. “Red-tailed hawks are a wonderful bird in the wild and, as a falconry bird, ideal for an apprentice,” says New Hampshire resident and Master Falconer Nancy Cowan. Falconry is the hunting of wild game using a trained bird of prey. Capturing and training one redtail to hunt wild prey does not hurt the red-tailed hawk population, Cowan explains.

In New Hampshire, you need a falconry permit and are required to apprentice for two years (two hunting seasons). As an apprentice, the first bird that you capture and train must be a juvenile red-tailed hawk or an American kestrel. “The redtail’s large size, ability to hunt a range of small and large game, and its lower metabolism make it easier for a budding falconer to maintain and train, compared to falcons and other hawks,” says Cowan.

Cowan is also a raptor rehabilitator and gets calls from all over the state about red-tailed hawks. She recounts one story about a redtail that was feeding on chipmunks at a McDonalds restaurant. Customers were feeding the chipmunks, and a red-tailed hawk took notice.

## Fall Migration

In the fall, Vallieres brings his enthusiasm and passion for all things raptor to the Carter Hill Raptor Observatory in Concord. Carter Hill is one of two hawk migration observatories maintained by New Hampshire Audubon. The other is the Pack Monadnock Raptor Migration Observatory in Peterborough. Fall hawk watching is popular across the region and especially at these two sites, where several thousand visitors come to observe migrating birds. Up to sixteen species of raptors – hawks, falcons, osprey, eagles,



*Redtails are ideal falconry birds for a beginner. Their hunting capability and lower metabolism make them easier to care for and train than other falcon and hawk species.*

vultures – and more than 7,000 to 12,000 individual birds are observed during the fall flight at Carter Hill and Pack Monadnock, respectively.

Red-tailed hawks that breed in northern New England and farther north migrate south for the winter, into southern New England and beyond. The peak period for red-tailed hawk migration through New Hampshire is the latter part of October and early November, with the highest counts at Carter Hill and Pack Monadnock reported on October 24<sup>th</sup> last year. Young red-tailed hawks migrate earlier and farther south than the adults; perhaps they are less experienced at finding food in the frozen, snow-packed ground of the north.

Many of the redtails that breed in southern New Hampshire stay year-round. If you want to see a red-tailed hawk, go for a drive along a highway or a back road that parallels a mix of field and woodland. Look for a large, stocky hawk-like bird perched in a tree or hovering in place on a windy day or soaring in slow, wide circles. Most likely, it will be a redtail. I love spotting the resident redtail

at my parent’s farm in western Massachusetts, perched stoically in a lone red maple at the edge of a field.





To observe red-tailed hawks and other raptors in migration, visit Carter Hill or Pack Monadnock, or any other exposed high point of land from September to November. You can be sure to see birds of prey in flight, and you’re likely to leave sharing my enthusiasm for the red-tailed hawk and its brethren.

*Ellen Snyder is a wildlife biologist from Newmarket and owner of Ibis Wildlife Consulting.*

## Where to See Redtails

New Hampshire has many great vantage points for seeing migrating hawks. Following are a few of my favorites. Visit between September 1 and October 31.

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-  **Carter Hill Raptor Observatory**  
Carter Hill Orchard, Concord, N.H.  
9 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
-  **Pack Monadnock Raptor Migration Observatory**  
Miller State Park, Peterborough, N.H.  
9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
-  **Little Blue Job Mountain**  
Blue Job State Park, First Crown Point Road, Strafford, NH
-  **Little Round Top Migration Observatory**  
Slim Baker Conservation Area, Bristol, NH



*Pack Monadnock Mountain, Peterborough, NH*