

ACCIPITRIFORMES

(Raptors)

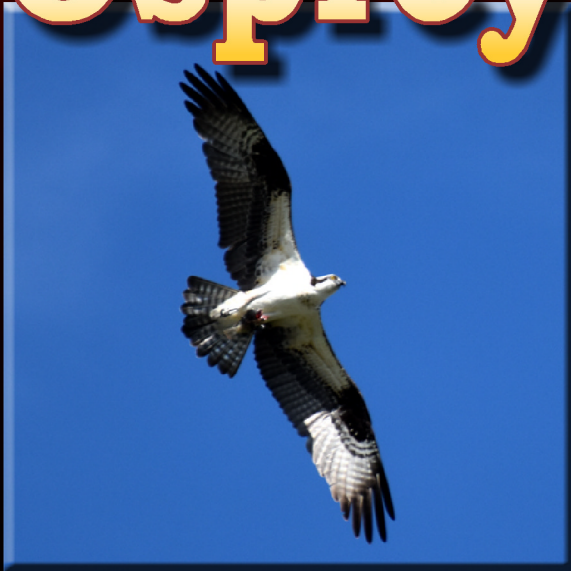
Hawks



Eagles



Osprey



Vultures



Family ACCIPITRIDAE (Hawks)

Red-Tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

Measurements:

Length: 19" Wing Span: 49"

Average Weight: (m) 2.26 lbs (f) 2.74 lbs

Distinguishing field characteristics:

large size; broad wings with conspicuous primary feathers that aid in soaring; rufous tail; light underparts with **dark patagium**; short, wedged **red tail** (not always distinctive when viewed from below)

Notes:

common; seen throughout North America, extending into n CAN, south to Panama; the most commonly seen buteo; considerable color variations among the 14 subspecies (Harlan's, Krider's, Southwestern, etc.) from light to dark; generalized carnivore

Mojave presence: year-round

Comments:

While identifying red-tails soaring around in nature is rather straightforward with minimal experience (despite the many plumage variations throughout their range), determining their gender is an entirely different matter. Yes, in general, females are considerably larger than their male counterparts, but this only works conclusively when you know that you're looking at a mated pair together! Otherwise, how would you differentiate a solitary large male from an equally lone small female? Well, you can't, so don't bother!

ventral plumage



southwestern subspecies:
B. j. fuertesi

Dolan Springs, AZ

dorsal plumage



Dolan Springs, AZ

wings dark above...



...light below

Corn Creek; DNWR; NV

tail not always
distinctively red



when viewed
from below!

Overton WMA; Overton, NV

"southwestern" light morph



Corn Creek; DNWR; NV

characteristic
dark patagium



Corn Creek; DNWR; NV

red tail is distinctive when
viewed from dorsal side



Hualupai Reservation; GC, AZ

hawk intercepted by a raven
and escorted out of its territory



Hualupai Reservation; GC, AZ

surveying its territory
from a typically
high vantage point



Corn Creek; DNWR; NV

typical launch position



Las Vegas Municipal GC; NV

Family ACCIPITRIDAE (Hawks) Red-Shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*)



Floyd Lamb SP; LV, NV

Measurements:

Length: 15-24" Wing Span: 35-50"

Average Weight: (m) 1.2 lbs (f) 1.5 lbs

Distinguishing field characteristics:

large size; **rusty head**, breast; pale belly with rusty streaks; long tail with b&w bars; dark eyes; yellow legs, feet; **rusty nape, neck**; dorsal wings brown with white mottling, ventral pale rusty lining; female larger than male, otherwise genders identical

Notes:

uncommon; native to NA; 2 subspecies (**B. l. lineatus**: Atlantic coast to the midwest, se CAN to Gulf Coast, e MEX; **B. l. elegans**: OR south to Baja, Pacific coast to AZ); preys on small mammals, also reptiles, crustaceans, fish, small birds, roadkill, etc.

Mojave presence: winter range; rare



Floyd Lamb SP; LV, NV



Everglades NP; Florida



Little Rock, AR



Little Rock, AR



Flamingo Bay; Everglades NP



Flamingo Bay; Everglades NP

Comments:

Red Shoulders are rare in the Mojave Desert; the specimen at Corn Creek in the **Desert National Wildlife Refuge** in September of 2020 (bottom right) was the first I'd spotted in the region.

I encountered numerous eastern-population birds while passing through Little Rock, AR, in Nov, 2019, and again in **Everglades NP** in 2021. Normally a forest dweller, this raptor has adapted well to urban life after depletion of its normal habitat. In lieu of trees, billboards and powerline poles serve quite nicely.



eastern subspecies:
B. l. lineatus



western subspecies:
B. l. elegans

Corn Creek; DNWR; NV

Family ACCIPITRIDAE (Hawks)

Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*)



Measurements:

Length: 17-22" Wing Span: 46-54"

Average Weight: (m) 1.8 lbs (f) 2.5 lbs

Distinguishing field characteristics:

large size; female slightly larger than male, otherwise genders identical; dark upper body; dark bill with yellow cere; light morph: underwing coverts bright white with dark flight feathers; gray head, rufous neck; dark morph: rufous underwing coverts with browner flight feathers

Notes:

uncommon; in spring and summer, found in prairies and grasslands throughout w NA from e AK and sw CAN south to n MEX, wintering in se SA; occurs in light, rufous, dark (~10%), and many intermediate morphs; migrates in large flocks (one of the longest migrating American raptors, second to the Peregrine Falcon); preys mainly on small mammals in summer, insects (especially grasshoppers) rest of the year

Mojave presence: summer range; rare



Comments:

Swainson's are rather rare migratory visitors to the Mojave. The birds pictured here at the Bosque del Apache NWR in west-central New Mexico in May of 2021 were the first I'd ever seen of this species. Note the white underwings with dark flight feathers typical of the light-morph variety.



Family ACCIPITRIDAE (Hawks) Ferruginous Hawk (*Buteo regalis*)

dark upperbody



Holbrook, AZ

Measurements:

Length: 20-27" Wing Span: 48-60"

Average Weight: (m) 2.5 lbs (f) 3.3 lbs

Distinguishing field characteristics:

large size; mostly dark upperbody with **pale patches** near wingtips, **very pale underside** (except dark morph); gray, rusty, or **white tail**; large, dark bill with **yellow cere**; female larger than male, otherwise genders identical

dark wings



Holbrook, AZ

Notes:

uncommon; usually solitary; native to NA from mid continent to Pacific coast, se AK and s CAN to Mex (rare in the east); largest buteo in NA; no subspecies, but dark and light morphs; preys mainly on small mammals, also reptiles, small birds, and insects

Mojave presence: winter range; some residents in east

white underbody



Holbrook, AZ

Comments:

These birds are rather rare in the Mojave, though there are some year-round residents in the far eastern section. The immature individual perched on a telephone pole near Dolan Springs, AZ, in May of 2021 was the first I had identified in the region; perhaps a new arrival just taking up residence. Other than one **Osprey** and an occasional **Turkey Vulture**, the only raptors I have seen manning these perches have been **Red-Tailed Hawks**, so this youngster caught me by surprise!

Ironically, I actually did see and photograph a specimen of this species nearly two years before the one at Dolan Springs, but I didn't recognize it at the time, and didn't ID it until much later when I was searching through old pics and came across the photo bottom right! It was also a juvenile, this one at the **Las Vegas Municipal Golf Course** in June of 2017!



Family ACCIPITRIDAE (Hawks)

Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*)

Measurements:

Length: 14" Wing Span: 31"

Average Weight: 10 oz

Distinguishing field characteristics:

medium size; graceful flight, narrow pointed wings, **dark red eyes**; **adults: gray plumage** (lighter underparts, darker above), dark gray outerwings, long black tail, dark eye patch; **juveniles:** dark gray head, dark plumage all around, usually streaked underparts

Notes:

uncommon; summer range in se US from Tx to FL, winters in SA; preys mainly on insects, also takes small birds, mammals, reptiles; typically perches on exposed branches to scan for prey; forms large flocks during migration, otherwise small groups

Mojave presence: very rare

Comments:

It's not very often that Nature fools me, but every now and then she throws me a curveball. The bird in the top photos had me completely stumped when I first spotted it. I knew it was rare for the Mojave region, and I had never personally seen one like it before, but I can almost always find out what something is with a little research once I get home. I say "almost," because not this time! Hence, I misidentified it as a different hawk, which was the closest I could find in my books and on the internet.

Fortunately, ranger Jeanne Tinsman at the Corn Creek Visitor's Center in the **Desert National Wildlife Refuge** near Las Vegas set me straight! She actually knew this particular bird, and that it hatched in 2019. Thus it is a juvenile that looks nothing like its adult counterparts. The red eyes were the clue!

These bottom photos (obtained from the internet for reference) are what the adults and juveniles normally look like.



Clark Co. Wetlands Pk; NV



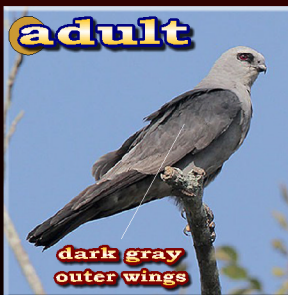
Clark Co. Wetlands Pk; NV



Clark Co. Wetlands Pk; NV



Clark Co. Wetlands Pk; NV



Family ACCIPITRIDAE (Hawks)

Cooper's Hawk (Accipiter cooperii)

Measurements:

Length: 16.5" Wing Span: 31"

Average Weight: (m) 12 oz (f) 1.25 lb

Distinguishing field characteristics:

medium size; long tail with 3 dark lateral bands and rounded white tip; stiff wing beats; pale orange to red eyes (gray in juveniles); crown and upperparts bluish gray; breast has light base color heavily overlain with rufous bands (juveniles lightly streaked with brown bands); genders similar

Notes:

uncommon; relatively secretive; found throughout NA from s CAN to MEX; easily confused with the Sharp-Shinned Hawk, though generally larger size, larger head, darker crown, lighter nape

Mojave presence: winter range (some year-round residents)

Comments:

Sometimes animals just don't behave like they're supposed to. The juvenile from Corn Creek in the Desert NWR (right) in July, 2020, was one example. Cooper's are generally secretive, but this youngster was unexpectedly bold and inquisitive. He flew right to a dead tree not 15 feet away, greeted me with a good-morning squawk, sat and patiently posed for a good 10-minute photo shoot, then flew straight at me for a final sendoff. What a great moment!

I had another close encounter with a juvenile of this usually secretive species at the Overton WMA (left) in September of 2020. He flew into the marsh vegetation near me, but was so intent on a potential meal he spotted that he paid no mind to my presence. I always say I'll take what Nature gives me; I've missed a lot of potentially great shots, but sometimes she can be quite generous!



Corn Creek; Desert NWR; NV



Desert NWR; Clark Co., NV



Corn Creek; Desert NWR; NV



Corn Creek; Desert NWR; NV



hiding in the brush...



juvenile



...spying a potential meal



gray eyes

Family ACCIPITRIDAE (Hawks)

Sharp-Shinned Hawk (Accipiter striatus)

Measurements:

Length: 11" Wing Span: 23"

Average Weight: (m) 3.5 oz (f) 6.5 oz

Distinguishing field characteristics:

small size; dark head and upperparts; **rufous-barred breast**; short tail with **3 dark lateral bands** with **squared** white tip; dark bill with **yellowish cere**; orange to red eyes in adults; quick wingbeats; generally flies low near cover; genders similar

Notes:

uncommon; secretive, though widespread throughout most of NA and parts of SA; very similar to **Cooper's Hawk**, but tail is square and shorter, head smaller, neck shorter; preys mainly on small birds

Mojave presence: winter range

Comments:

The **Bird Viewing Preserve** in Henderson, Nevada, is a premier location for bird-watching enthusiasts. Yet even here, "sharpies" are an uncommon and exciting sight, such as this juvenile that made an appearance in January of 2022. Far less common than the **Cooper's Hawk**, sharp-shins are easily mistaken for their larger cousin, as both share very similar plumage and features. In particular, note the generally smaller size (since a side-by-side comparison is highly unlikely, determining this difference comes with experience) and shorter, square-tipped tail. Juveniles of both species present dark upper bodies and wings, and paler undersides with distinct brown barring on the breast.



Clark Co. Wetlands Park; NV

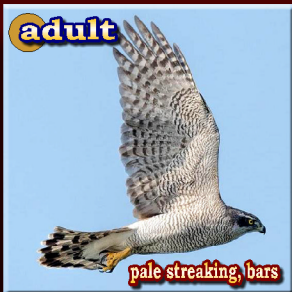


Clark Co. Wetlands Park; NV



Family ACCIPITRIDAE (Hawks)

Northern Goshawk (Accipiter gentilis)



Measurements:

Length: (m) 21" (f) 24" Wing Span: (m) 38" (f) 47"

Average Weight: (m) 3.5 oz (f) 6.5 oz

Distinguishing field characteristics:

large size; usually steel- to brownish-gray upperbody with dark barring; whitish undersides with fine barring; broad wings; long tail with 3-5 dark lateral bands; dark bill with yellow cere; bold white eyebrow; orange to red eyes; juvenile very similar to juvenile **Cooper's Hawk** (brown with strong barring on buffy underparts) but thinner and uneven bands on tail, pale yellow eyes, and pale eyebrow; adult genders similar, though female larger

Notes:

uncommon to rare; prefers woodland habitats with nearby open areas in temperate zones throughout Northern Hemisphere; largest member of the genus **Accipiter**; 10 subspecies; preys mainly on gamebirds (grouse, quail, etc.), rabbits, and rodents

Mojave presence: rare; winter range

Comments:

The juvenile shown here is the only individual of the species that I have observed in the Mojave. Easily mistaken for a juvenile **Cooper's Hawk**, young goshawks differ in having thinner, uneven crossbands on tail; a lighter, less distinct patagium; and yellow eyes (versus the Cooper's gray eyes).

Like Coopers, goshawks are usually stealthy ambushers that **stay hidden in tree cover** until a prospective prey is spotted, then pounced upon in a swift missile-fast attack! However, this youngster (subspecies **A. g. atricapillus**) seemed to defy its classic behavior by **soaring** high above sparsely treed **desert scrub** in Pine Canyon in the Cerbat Range near Dolan Springs, Arizona, in January of 2023.



Family ACCIPITRIDAE (Hawks)

Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus/hudsonius*)

male

black primaries,
inner secondaries



Corn Crk; Desert NWR; NV

male

dark
head



plain white underparts

Corn Crk; Desert NWR; NV

Measurements:

Length: 16-22" Wing Span: 38-48"

Average Weight: (m) 12 oz (f) 19 oz

Distinguishing field characteristics:

large size; long tail and wings, characteristic **white rump** coverts, **owl-like facial disk** (discernable at close range); **yellow eyes**; (m): dark gray upper body and head, white below, clean white wings with black primaries and secondaries closest to body; (f): browner overall with barred underwings and streaked breast

Notes:

uncommon, solitary; found widespread throughout NA, wintering in southern US and south to Colombia; preys mainly on small birds and mammals; female larger than male (typical for hawks)

Mojave presence: winter range

Comments:

Though generally considered uncommon, harriers are regular winter visitors to the **Bird Viewing Preserve** in Henderson, Nevada. Males like this one in January of 2021 are smaller than females, have a gray upper body (versus the brown of females), and present clean, bright white underwings and belly (compared to the barring on females). However, both genders possess the white rump that is characteristic of all harriers.

This female at the preserve in March, 2022, seemed to be interested in a wayward egg (left). Closer inspection showed it to be just a white rock. But with some patience on my part (and determination to find out what she was up to), I finally discovered her intent. After considerable time on the ground for no apparent reason, she finally alighted with her prize (right)--what at first looked like a snake, was actually a large bullfrog!

female

barred
wings



larger than male

Bird Viewing Preserve; NV

female

brown; boldly barred

Bird Viewing Preserve; NV



Family ACCIPITRIDAE (Eagles)

Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*)

Measurements:

Length: 30-40" Wing Span: 80-88"

Average Weight: (m) 8 lbs (f) 11 lbs

Distinguishing field characteristics:

very large size (larger and heavier than buteos and vultures); **dark brown plumage** and **golden-brown nape**; dark gray flight feathers (compared to distinctive white on vultures); steady, soaring flight

Notes:

uncommon; solitary and rarely seen; found in mountainous areas throughout Canada and western U.S., Eurasia, and limited areas of North Africa; golden nape not always conspicuous in flight; prey predominantly mammals (rabbits and hares, squirrels, etc.)

Mojave presence: year-round



Grizzly and Wolf
Discovery Center
W. Yellowstone, MT



typically seen soaring
near cliff faces

Red Rock Cyn NCA; NV



white wing patches
of young eagle

Goodsprings, NV

Comments:

Golden eagles are a rather rare sight in the Mojave Desert. However, the most likely time to see these majestic birds is in the fall/winter months flying close to mountain ridges and cliffs, like the two pictured here. The one on the left was cruising high through **Lee Canyon** in the Spring Mountains west of Las Vegas, Nevada. The one on the right was searching for a late-evening snack over **Hoover Dam**. Both were photographed in November, 2018. Even from a distance (below left) or in dark-lit conditions (below right), their large size, broad wings, and soaring flight are obvious and distinctive characteristics.



high cruising



late hunting

Family ACCIPITRIDAE (Eagles)

Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)



Measurements:

Length: 28-40" Wing Span: 70-90"

Average Weight: (m) 9 lbs (f) 12 lbs

Distinguishing field characteristics:

very large size; dark body with bold **white head and tail** (adults); yellow, strongly hooked beak; female larger, otherwise genders identical



Yellowstone NP



Paurotis Pond; Everglades NP

Notes:

uncommon; usually solitary; occurs near wetlands throughout NA (breeding birds always found near water); feeds primarily on fish, but will also take mammals, birds, occasionally carrion; two subspecies; northern populations migrate south, while southern ones remain permanent residents; juveniles can be confused with the **Golden Eagle**, adults with **Osprey** (but lack the distinct black eye stripe, and possess a yellow beak)



Mojave presence: winter range (rare)

Comments:

During a 6000-mile cross-country adventure in the spring of 2021, I encountered this pair of majestic birds by a small lake near Bemidji, Minnesota. Oddly, I only saw four bald eagles on the entire trip (these two, one that flew over my vehicle in Michigan that I was not able to get a picture of, and one being chased by a crow in Florida's **Everglades National Park** (above left); yet everyone I spoke to along the journey informed me that bald eagles were all over the place! Yeah, right!

Certainly, though generally considered to be uncommon, bald eagles can be relatively abundant locally and seasonally, but apparently not when I'm packing a camera!



a lake all to themselves



dark body, wings

white head, tail



typically perched
in tall tree

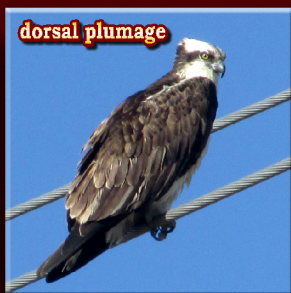


classic launch

Family PANDIONIDAE (Osprey) Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)



Lake Kaibab; Williams, AZ



Dolan Springs, AZ



Lake Kaibab; Williams, AZ



Pompano Beach, FL



Pompano Beach, FL



Lake Kaibab; Williams, AZ



Lake Okeechobee; FL



Pompano Beach, FL

Measurements:

Length: 25" Wing Span: 72"

Average Weight: 3.5 lbs

Distinguishing field characteristics:

very large size; dark upperparts, white underparts; underwings grayish with pure white "armpits" and faintly dark patagium, not as broad as hawks and eagles; white head has **black eye stripe**; strongly hooked black beak (bluish cere)

Notes:

common; one of only 6 cosmopolitan (except Antarctica) land birds; four subspecies; diurnal raptor, eats fish almost exclusively; at first glance often confused with bald eagle, but black eye stripe is distinctive

Mojave presence: rare

Comments:

At first glance, ospreys are often confused with bald eagles, especially from a distance. However, the eagle lacks the black eye stripe that is distinctive of the osprey. Also, the osprey's strongly hooked, black beak (bluish cere) is shorter than the bald eagle's broad yellow beak, its tail is black rather than white, and its characteristic underwing pattern can be discerned by an experienced eye even at a distance. I recently (Jan. 2021) spotted a rare visitor (right) soaring high over the [Bird Viewing Preserve](#) in Henderson, NV, and recognized it solely by its underwing pattern.



BVP; Henderson, NV

Family CATHARTIDAE (Vultures)

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*)

Measurements:

Length: 24-32" Wing Span: 63-72"

Average Weight: 4 lbs

Distinguishing field characteristics:

very large size; brownish-black body plumage, **naked red head**, pale bill and legs; soaring reveals characteristic black-and-white underwing pattern; nostrils perforated straight through bill; both sexes essentially identical in plumage and size, thus gender is difficult to determine

Notes:

common; "New World" vulture ranging across NA from s CAN south through South America; feeds almost exclusively on carrion; not closely related to "Old World" vultures

Mojave presence: summer range



clean-up crew with raven;
distinctive naked, red heads

SR 127 near Baker, CA



eastern subspecies:
C. a. septentrionalis

Murfreesboro, AR



western subspecies:
C. a. meridionalis

near Dolan Springs, AZ



characteristic wing pattern

Avawatz Mtns; CA



Corn Crk; DNWR; NV



Dolan Springs, AZ



Dolan Springs, AZ



Grand Canyon NP; AZ



Grand Canyon NP; AZ

Juveniles:

gray face and dark beak; slightly browner than adults; two-tone underwing pattern characteristic of adults is not fully developed

Adults:

appear black at distance, but are more brownish when viewed close up; red head and white flight feathers are distinctive



Grapevine Cyn; Laughlin, NV

Family CATHARTIDAE (Vultures) California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*)



Measurements:

Length: 43-55" Wing Span: 98-118"

Average Weight: 18-20 lbs

Distinguishing field characteristics:

very large size; dark blackish brown overall body, **naked red head**, dark underwing plumage with black flight feathers and white "armpit" feathers; distinctively larger than turkey vultures

Notes:

rare; largest NA land bird; listed as ENDANGERED; extinct in the wild in 1987, reintroduced to n AZ, s UT, s CA, and Baja California as a result of successful captive-breeding program; females **smaller** than males (unusual for raptors); all adults ID'd by numbered tags



South Rim; GCNP



South Rim; GCNP



Grand Wash Cliffs, AZ

Mojave presence: rare vagrant

Comments:

Despite a face that only a mother can love, condors are still a very elegant and rare sight to behold. From a distance, with their heads tucked in, they can easily be mistaken for **Golden Eagles**. However, a closer view reveals the distinctive black-and-white underwing pattern and the bald red head characteristic of the species. If you're really fortunate, one could fly right over your head--close enough to show off its unique wing tag, like the one that flew over me on a beautiful day in April, 2019, along the **Grand Wash Cliffs** that define the boundary between the **Mojave Desert/Great Basin Province** and the **Colorado Plateau Province**. The lesson here is that if you're out to take photos of whatever Nature has to offer, keep your head on a swivel!

