

Red-shouldered Hawk, *Buteo lineatus*

Status: *State:* Endangered (breeding population), Threatened (nonbreeding population)
Federal: Migratory Nongame Bird of Management Concern

Identification

The red-shouldered hawk is a crow-sized buteo, or soaring hawk. The adults are strikingly plumed, with rufous (brownish red) shoulder patches and a rufous barred breast. Rufous lesser and median upperwing coverts form the “red shoulders” evident on this species. The flight feathers of adults are barred black and white and show a white crescent-shaped window across the primaries,



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which is visible in flight. The underparts, which are rufous with white barring, often exhibit thin, dark streaks on the chest. The head and back are dark brown. The black tail is bisected by several narrow white bands. Although females average slightly larger than males, plumage is similar for both sexes. The call of the red-shouldered hawk is a series of nasal drawn-out “aahhh” cries.

Juvenile red-shouldered hawks can be distinguished from adults by their overall browner, less brilliant plumage. The shoulder patches of juveniles are paler rufous and the crescents across the primaries are tawny. The underparts are whitish with variable amounts of brown streaking. The tail is brown with several thin pale bands. Adult plumage appears in the second year.

The red-shouldered hawk is a long-tailed buteo with squared-off wings and a protruding head. Characterized by quick choppy wingbeats interspersed with short glides, the flight style of this hawk is similar to that of an accipiter. When soaring, most buteos hold their wings straight out, whereas the red-shouldered hawk bows its wings forward.

Habitat

Mature wet woods such as hardwood swamps and riparian forests typify red-shouldered hawk breeding habitat. Nesting territories, which occur in deciduous, coniferous, or mixed woodlands, are typically located within remote and extensive old growth forests containing standing water. Consequently, breeding barred owls (*Strix varia*) and Cooper’s hawks (*Accipiter cooperii*) are often found in habitats containing red-shouldered hawks.

Red-shouldered hawks select large deciduous and, to a lesser extent, coniferous trees for nesting. Nests have been documented in oak (*Quercus spp.*), pine (*Pinus spp.*), maple (*Acer spp.*), ash (*Fraxinus spp.*), beech (*Fagus grandifolia*), birch (*Betula spp.*),

basswood (*Tilia americana*), chestnut (*Castanea dentata*), hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*), elm (*Ulmus spp.*), cherry (*Prunus spp.*), hickory (*Carya spp.*), and tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*). Forest characteristics include a closed canopy of tall trees, an open subcanopy, and variable amounts of understory cover.

Red-shouldered hawks inhabit wetland forest types unique to the different physiographic regions throughout northern and southern New Jersey. In north Jersey, they occupy riparian forests, wooded wetlands, beaver meadows, and mesic (slightly moist) lowland forests. Within the Pequannock Watershed, red-shouldered hawks are found in stream bottomlands and coniferous or mixed forests containing eastern hemlock or white pine (*Pinus strobus*). Nests are predominately located in wilderness areas where there are abundant wetlands, small forest openings, and limited areas of large open water such as lakes. In the Pequannock Watershed, red-shouldered hawks avoid areas of human inhabitation, steep uplands, dry slopes, open water, areas with limited conifers, and areas with too many or too few forest openings. Although red-shouldered hawks require extensive tracts of forested habitat for nesting, territories may also contain edges where the birds forage.

The majority of red-shouldered hawk nests in southern New Jersey are contained within vast contiguous freshwater wetlands. Hardwood or mixed hardwood/cedar swamps containing red maple (*Acer rubrum*), black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*), sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*), sweetbay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*), and Atlantic white cedar (*Chamaecyparis thyoides*) are occupied by red-shouldered hawks. Often, such large forested tracts are surrounded by oak/pine forests or agricultural fields. Although red-shouldered hawks nest in large contiguous tracts of wet old growth forests in Cumberland County, they occupy younger wet woods, often on private property safeguarded from high levels of human activity, in Cape May County.

An-area sensitive species, the red-shouldered hawk typically nests away from residences, roads, and development. In the Pequannock Watershed, red-shouldered hawk nests were located an average of 1,013 m and a standard deviation of plus or minus 614 m ($3,324 \pm 2,014$ ft.) from the nearest building; and an average of 812 m and a standard deviation of plus or minus 634 m ($2,664 \pm 2,080$ ft) from the nearest road (Bosakowski et al. 1991). Red-shouldered hawks avoid small fragmented woodlots and forests that do not contain trees large enough for nesting.

Red-shouldered hawks require large contiguous wooded tracts of 100 to 250 hectares (250 to 620 acres) (Johnsgard 1990). Eastern populations occupy breeding home ranges of 109 to 339 hectares (270 to 838 acres) (Crocoll 1994). In the Pequannock Watershed, red-shouldered hawk breeding densities were estimated at one nest per 450 hectares (1,112 acres) with an average distance of 1.2 to 1.6 km (0.75 to 1.0 mi.) between nests in areas containing the highest breeding concentrations (Bosakowski et al. 1991). Home range sizes of males exceed those of females, during both the breeding and nonbreeding seasons. Individuals of either sex may expand their home ranges while rearing young or throughout the winter months.

During the nonbreeding season, red-shouldered hawks are less restrictive in their habitat use. They inhabit the traditional wetland forests occupied during the breeding season as well as uplands, fragmented woods, smaller forests, open areas, and edges.

Status and Conservation

The red-shouldered hawk was once considered a common resident of wet lowland forests in New Jersey. Only a century ago, bounties were placed on birds of prey, which were accused of poultry and game predation. This unfortunate practice, coupled with egg collecting and the placement of wild red-shouldered hawks in captivity, may have caused initial population declines. The clearing of forests and filling of wetlands exacerbated red-shouldered hawk declines, which were noted as early as the mid-1920s. Reduced numbers of red-shouldered hawks wintering in New Jersey were documented from the early 1950s to the 1970s, as development increased and forest contiguity and patch size decreased. As a result, the red-shouldered hawk, with an estimated 100 breeding pairs in the state, was listed as a threatened species in New Jersey in 1979. In 1982, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the red-shouldered hawk as a Migratory Nongame Bird of Management Concern due to population declines and restricted habitat requirements. In addition, the red-shouldered hawk was included on the National Audubon Society's Blue List of Imperiled Species from 1972 to 1986, the final year of the list.

During the 1980s, habitat loss continued to pose an increasing threat, causing red-shouldered hawk populations to decline ever further. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the state's breeding population was estimated at only 36 pairs, nearly one-third the population size at the time of original listing. As a result, the breeding population of the red-shouldered hawk was reclassified as endangered in 1991. The nonbreeding population remained listed as threatened. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers the red-shouldered hawk to be "demonstrably secure globally," yet "imperiled in New Jersey because of rarity" (Office of Natural Lands Management 1992). Habitat loss and declines of red-shouldered hawks in the Northeast have resulted in the listing of this species as threatened in New York and of special concern in Connecticut.