

*Photo 1. Adult red-tailed hawk.  
Note the belly band and dark  
shoulder patch.*



# Here's how to identify WYOMING'S WONDERFUL RAPTORS

*By Tim Ludwick*

As a self-professed bird geek, I'm often asked by friends and family to identify some feathered creature that has flown into their yards.

The conversation usually starts with, "Tim, something big and whitish-brown just landed in the tree behind my house. What is it?"

Unfortunately, there are many big white and brown birds that live in Wyoming. Many of these are members of the group of birds known as raptors (hawks, eagles, and falcons). Officially, 22 raptor species have been recorded in Wyoming. The list can be found on the Wyoming Game and Fish Department Web site at <http://gf.state.wy.us/wildlife/nongame/SpeciesList/>.

Chances are you've encountered at least one member of this charismatic (they tend to be easy to observe, have fascinating behavior, and grab people's attention) family at some point, whether in your own backyard or while traveling the state.

## **Raptors Found in All of Wyoming**

Some live here year-round while others visit only during the summer or winter. They can be found in all corners of the state from forested mountains to open prairies.

Raptors are important components of the natural landscape, and a healthy raptor population is a good indicator of a healthy ecosystem. By feeding on rodents such as mice and rabbits or insects like grasshoppers, raptors help balance ecosystems.

While growing up, my family always had birdfeeders, and I've always been drawn to birds. Whether it was their bright colors, beautiful songs, or just the ability to fly, something about them sparked my interest. It was a bald eagle flying in Yellowstone National Park, though, that turned me into a real bird geek. Since then, my passion for birds has only grown. Hopefully, this article will inspire you to look for some of the most common Wyoming raptors and maybe you'll find yourself drawn into the world of birds.

## **Identifying Three of the Most Common Raptors**

I'll show you how to identify a few of the most common Wyoming raptors and give you tips (see page 23) on how to identify the rest.

The **red-tailed hawk** (Photo 1) is a year-round Wyoming resident and probably the most common raptor in the state. Red-tailed hawks are found from mountains to prairies and are one of the raptors most tolerant of human activity. They nest in pines, cottonwoods, and

*Photo 2. Adult American kestrel.  
Note the wing color and facial  
markings.*



sometimes even in small shelterbelts. Red-tailed hawks primarily eat rabbits and other small rodents. The red-tailed hawk is a large, bulky looking hawk. From underneath, most red-tailed hawks show a broad band of brown stripes across the belly. As the name implies, most adult red-tailed hawks have distinctive rusty-colored tails. Juvenile red-tailed hawks do not get the red tail until after their first year, but both adult and juveniles have a distinctive black patch on their shoulder easily seen in flight. This patch is not found on any other Wyoming raptor. When perched, both the belly band and red tail are often visible. The upper wings and back on the red-tail hawk tend to be more mottled with white than other Wyoming raptors.

The **American kestrel** (Photo 2) is North America's smallest falcon. They are commonly seen on power lines and fences wherever there is open space. They hunt small mammals and insects, often spotting their prey while hovering. Kestrels are cavity nesters and will use old woodpecker holes, cavities in creek banks, and crevices in rock outcrops. Sometimes, they can even be enticed to nest in specially designed nest boxes ([www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/wildlife/ndblinds/kestrel.htm](http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/wildlife/ndblinds/kestrel.htm)). These small raptors only spend the summer in Wyoming to breed; they migrate south during winter to grasslands from the southern U.S. to Costa Rica. Like all falcons, they have a sharp-winged silhouette. Kestrels are distinctive in that they are one of the few dimorphic raptor species; that is, the female and male have different-colored plumage. The female kestrel sports bright orange-red wings, while the males are a blue-gray. Both sexes show a boldly patterned face with dark lines below the eye and an orange-red back.

The **Swainson's hawk** (Photo 3) is a common raptor of the open prairie. They are found in Wyoming only in the summer and migrate more than 6,000 miles to spend winters on the grasslands of Argentina. The Swainson's hawk is one of the larger raptors (average wingspan 50 inches) in Wyoming although it tends to have a slimmer profile than many of the other large hawks. In flight, its wings tend to have a tapered look, and it often flies with its wings held at a slight upward angle. It is easily identified by its reddish-brown bib and white throat. In flight,

*Tim Ludwick is a wildlife biologist with ICF International in Gillette. He can be reached at (724) 689-3189 or [tjludwick@gmail.com](mailto:tjludwick@gmail.com).*

its wings show a distinctive contrast between the dark trailing edge (back) and light leading edge (front). Juvenile birds in their first year show these same markings, but the bib and dark parts on the wings tend to be much lighter. When perched, the bib and throat are still readily seen. Unlike the red-tailed hawk, the Swainson's hawk has a solid brown back.

For additional raptor information, see:

- [www.allaboutbirds.org](http://www.allaboutbirds.org) (bird life history and identification)
- [www.peregrinefund.org](http://www.peregrinefund.org) (raptor conservation)
- [www.hawkmountain.org](http://www.hawkmountain.org) (identification, quizzes, and conservation)



## How to identify raptors

I take the same steps in identifying each of the raptors in the main article.

**First**, I look at its overall size and profile.

**Next**, I look at the overall feather pattern. Since many of the raptors you'll see will be in flight, it's best to get to know them from this angle. When looking at feather patterns, start at the head and work to the tail, but, remember, you might not have long.

**Finally**, I look for some distinguishing characteristic to help separate it from other species.

Learning to identify raptors takes a lot of practice. Grab a bird book (I use the *National Geographic Field Guide to Birds of North America* and *The Sibley Guide to Birds*) and some binoculars and head outside. For raptors, 8x40 magnification works best. There are many good guides to purchasing binoculars on the Internet, and [birding.com](http://birding.com) is a good starting point.

With time and patience, you'll discover many of the wonderful raptors that call Wyoming home.



Photo 3. Adult Swainson's hawk. Note the bib and throat color.