



MANY RAPTOR SPECIES ROAM WYOMING SKIES. HERE'S HOW TO IDENTIFY THEM.

Northern Harrier

When you think of raptors, does your mind wander to a creature from the Jurassic Park movies? Mine occasionally does.

However, the word raptor applies to more than the scaly, toothy, and oversized Velociraptor. In fact, the origin of raptor means “plunderer” or “seized.” For wildlife enthusiasts, it is often a general term used to describe a bird of prey.

What birds fall under the raptor moniker? Generally, any bird that captures prey with its feet is a raptor. Raptors include eagles, buteo hawks, owls, falcons, kites, accipiters, osprey, and harriers. While vultures and condors do not use their feet to capture prey, we lump them in with the raptors.

Accipiters

Our first group of raptors are the accipiters (ak-SIP-i-ters). While often incorrectly called sparrowhawks,

accipiters prey on far more than your typical little brown birds. These raptors are often thought of as ambush hunters, hunting forest and edge habitat. They hunt from a perch, watching for songbirds and small mammals. When they see an opportunity, they burst out of cover, using powerful flaps as they attempt to chase down their prey. Many wildlife lovers will see these birds hunting near their bird feeders. To achieve these short bursts and tight maneuvers, which allow them to be excellent small bird predators, accipiters have short, rounded wings and long tails. These features give these raptors a “cross” shape in silhouette. This, along with their hunting style, help identify these ferocious feeders! In Wyoming, we have three species of accipiter: sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper’s hawk, and northern goshawk.

Falcons

Our second group of raptors, falcons, are known for their speed. While most folks know about the peregrine falcon, we experience four other species in the Cowboy State (noted below). Falcons often hunt open spaces from the wing. If they see prey, they will stoop, or dive, at high speeds, often killing their prey in the air; however, not all falcons use this technique. American kestrels will hover when they see prey. Merlins often attempt to ambush prey. Identification of falcons does not require much effort. Look for their slender, pointed wings with a longish tail. The wings often point posteriorly, like a fighter-jet. Wingbeats are often stiff and rapid. Use the shape for help in identifying all falcons, and use the speed and hunting style to identify the larger falcons. We have five species of “fighter-jet” falcons in

Wyoming: American kestrel, Merlin, prairie falcon, peregrine falcon, and gyrfalcon.

Eagles

Eagles are the third group of raptors. While the bald eagle is the symbol of our country, its hunting behavior is not going to inspire pride. Bald eagles are often scavenging, especially in winter. During the breeding season, however, bald eagles can be seen “fishing.” The golden eagle, while also known to scavenge, is an aggressive hunter. While a large percentage of their food is rabbit-based, they have been known to take down prey as large as seals and caribou, though this behavior is very rare. Because both eagles are scavengers, this is a reminder to pick up or bury carcasses and gut piles that were shot with lead ammunition. Our national symbol thanks you! Eagles are easily identified by their size and long, broad wings. Their wingbeats are deep and “flexible” in appearance. Use the “cargo-jet” shape and hunting from high perches to identify our two eagle species.

Buteos

Buteos, or soaring hawk, are our most-common raptors. They hunt in a variety of ways, so their common shape is the best chance at identifying these soarers. Most buteos hunt from a perch or high on the wing. They are often seen soaring, using their broad wings to catch thermals. To identify a hawk, look for broad wings of medium length and a medium to a short tail. They are smaller than eagles, with shorter wings and stiffer wingbeats. In Wyoming, there are five common

species of buteo hawk: red-tailed hawk, Swainson’s hawk, Ferruginous hawk, rough-legged hawk, and broad-winged hawk.

Unspecified

The last raptors to discuss are a hodgepodge. The northern harrier is a grassland and marsh species, often seen flying low to the ground, listing back and forth. Look for long, thin wings and a long tail on this species. Occasionally, harriers will hold their wings in a dihedral (v-shape). Speaking of dihedrals, the turkey vulture is also known to hold its wings in a dihedral. Vultures are often confused with eagles, but look for the broad wings with much less length than an eagle. The lack of feathers on the head often give the turkey vulture a “headless” appearance from a distance.

Lastly, there is the osprey. Often seen near rivers and lakes, osprey hunt fish almost exclusively. The hunting style of the osprey is very different than the bald eagle. Eagles will “pick” fish out of the water; osprey plunge, feet first, into the water. Additionally, osprey have thinner wings than eagles, with an awkward shape. The leading edge of the wing appears to have a “point” closer to the distal end of the wings.

.....
Zach Hutchinson is a community naturalist with Audubon Rockies and hopes this article inspires readers to get to know Wyoming raptors. A field guide is at rockies.audubon.org. Another resource is the Audubon Guide to Birds, www.audubon.org/bird-guide. Hot tips on where to find raptors are on the Wyoming Bird Trail app for iOS and Android. Hutchinson can be reached at zhutchinson@audubon.org.

Identification key

1. Sharp-shinned hawk, immature: Note short, stocky wings and body, long slim tail that is short for an accipiter, and small head. Plumage is difficult to see on distant birds, but 1st-years lack a rufous tone underneath.

2. Bald eagle: Very distinct white heads and tails and dark overall. Very large with long, broad wings and yellow legs and bill.

3. American kestrel: Note pale underside with orangey chest, black spots on belly, two black “sideburns” on head, and blue upperwing coverts (feather that smooth airflow over wing), orange tail with black tip.

4. Northern harrier: Very distinct brilliant white underside with a black border on flight feathers. Note long, slim wings and tail, and small head.

5. American kestrel: Note pale underside with orangey chest, black spots on belly, two black “sideburns” on head, and blue upperwing coverts, orange tail with black tip.

6. Turkey vulture: Blackish overall; reddish head can be difficult to see at a distance but white bill usually glows. Note long, broad, squared-off wings, broad tail, and modified dihedral when gliding.

7. Sharp-shinned hawk, adult: Note short, stocky wings and body, long slim tail that is short for an accipiter, and small head.

8. Broad-winged hawk, immature: Stocky pointed wings, large head, and short, narrow tail. Pale underside with dark streaking on sides of breast, and indistinct tail pattern with darker tip denote 1st-year. Some (like this bird) have streaks on belly similar to red-tailed.

9. Red-shouldered hawk, adult: Note somewhat stocky squared-off wings with translucent “commas” along the primaries



Image courtesy Francois Portmann

(outer flight feathers). Adults have bold black and white bands on wings and tail and a warm reddish underside.

10. Red-shouldered hawk, immature: Note somewhat stocky squared-off wings with translucent “commas” along the primaries. Pale underside with buffy underwing coverts, and dark, evenly spaced streaking on body denote 1st-year.

11. Northern harrier: Very distinct brilliant white underside with a black border on flight feathers. Note long, slim wings and tail, and small head.

12. Merlin, adult: Merlin has stockier, more sharply pointed wings, broader, shorter tail, and is “chesty” compared with kestrel. Juvenile and adult females are pale below with

heavy, dark streaking, heavily “checkered” underwings, and distinct tail bands.

13. Northern harrier, immature: Pale underneath mostly brown flight feathers. Note long, narrow wings and tail (showing bands when spread). Head is small with owl-like facial disc.

14. Red-tailed hawk: Quintessential broad-winged, short-tailed buteo shape. Plumage is pale underneath with dark patagial (shin on leading edge of wing) bars and bellyband.

15. Cooper’s hawk, immature: Pale underneath with dark streaks throughout underbody, and brown head denote 1st-year. Note long wings for an accipiter, large head, and long tail with white tip.

16. Cooper’s hawk, immature: Pale underneath with dark streaks throughout underbody, and brown head denote 1st-year. Note long wings for an accipiter, large head, and long tail with white tip.

17. Peregrine falcon, adult: Pale underneath with heavily streaked body, heavily “checkered” underwings, and dark head. Note very long, pointed wings, heavy body, and broad tail and head. Wingtips are less sharply pointed in a full soar.

18. Osprey: Note the dark stripe through the eye, long, dark brown wings, white underside, and a black bill with sharp hook.

19. Sharp-shinned hawk, adult: Note short, stocky wings and body, long slim tail that is short for an accipiter, and small head.