

BIRD EXPLORER

The Buteo hawks of winter

BY PETER J. THIEMANN

In our region we can observe five Buteo hawk species. (Buteo is the Latin name of the common hawk.) One species is the Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), a year-round resident and by far the most common. Others are the Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*) and the Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), which nest and breed in our area, but then leave as winter approaches. The Red-shouldered Hawk just moves south a bit to warmer climes in California. This species has recently expanded its summer range to include Oregon as the climate warms. The Swainson's Hawk makes a spectacular migration all the way to wintering grounds in Argentina with large "kettles" of hawks being observed annually in some places in Mexico. (A kettle is a term that birders use to describe a group of birds wheeling and circling in the air.)

Two more Buteo hawks are the Ferruginous Hawk and the Rough-legged Hawk. The Ferruginous Hawk (*Buteo regalis*) is the "royal" hawk. True to its

name, it is the largest of the five species, and was used by royalty in the past for falconry. It is arguably the most beautiful, often mostly white with rusty-brown upperparts. Coming to our area to spend the winter, the Ferruginous Hawk is an awesome sight when it soars high in a blue winter sky. Some Ferruginous Hawks nest in eastern Oregon, while some come from the Rocky Mountain states and Canada.

The other winter guest is the Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*). This hawk nests in the subarctic of Canada and Alaska where it feeds mostly on small rodents on the open tundra. The Rough-legged Hawk has feathered feet, an adaptation to its subarctic summer range. It can be seen hovering above a meadow when hunting for voles and other rodents, a technique not used by other Buteos.

Hawk identification is somewhat of a challenge as many morphs occur in four of the five Buteo hawk species. (A morph is a local population of a species that consists of interbreeding

organisms.) Dark, intermediate and light morphs can be observed in addition to the usual plumage differences of juvenile and adult birds. To make it even more complicated, the Red-tailed Hawk has 16 subspecies. Western Red-tailed Hawks usually have deep red tails. Most hawks of this species are residents, but there is also an influx from up north and some migration to points further south.

Dark and light morphs of the four Buteo hawks are truly a sight to behold, an experience much sought after by serious birders (the fifth Buteo hawk, the Red-shouldered Hawk, does not display much color variation). Some local birding guides and Audubon Society lecturers routinely offer hawk identification classes due to the complexity of the task. But that is the fun part of it—especially in winter when hawks are much more visible as they often perch on fence posts and soar above hunting meadows and forest openings.

So as winter approaches, take a look up into the sky. If a large raptor

appears, it may be one of the five Buteos—some are here to stay, some are coming from up north, and some are leaving for the south!

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Peter J. Thiemann, Flickr photo stream



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Red-tailed Hawk



Red-shouldered Hawk



Swainson's Hawk



Ferruginous Hawk



Rough-legged Hawk



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