



Creature Feature: Winter 2011

By W. Scott Douglas

Red Tail Hawks

For nature-lovers, there is perhaps no greater thrill than watching a raptor close-up; either rushing past us on a hunting dive or alertly perched in a tree in the backyard. Perhaps it's the same fascination we extend to all predators, or maybe a reminder of childhood fantasies of dinosaurs, but regardless, the cold hard stare of a raptor still sends chills up my spine.



We are blessed to have several species of raptors that breed in our watershed. The most commonly seen of the diurnal raptors are the Red-Tailed Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Sharp-shinned Hawk, American Kestrel, Osprey, and Bald Eagle. If we are lucky, we may also see a Broad-winged Hawk (I've seen many in migration), Red-shouldered Hawk, or even a Merlin. The most common here, and in the rest of North America, is the Red-tailed Hawk, *Buteo jamaicensis*. The Redtail is a grayish brown, medium-sized raptor with a wingspan of 3.5 to 4.5 feet. While identification of raptors on the fly can be challenging, look for the broad rounded wings, short tail, and lightly streaked underbelly and wings. Only adults have the distinct rufous tail, and it's most easily viewed from the top. Despite their size, these birds only weigh 2-3 pounds at most, which limits their prey to small mammals, snakes and an occasional songbird. Redtails prefer open areas for hunting, where they perch upon exposed branches, buildings, and telephone poles. When they locate suitable prey they launch themselves from their perch and dive down with talons outstretched. The prey is quickly dispatched with the beak and taken as quickly as possible to a perch or thicket. Hence, Redtails will typically only kill prey that weighs less than they do; however they will scavenge from carrion of all sizes. Just because a raptor is feeding from a carcass does not mean that it was the one that killed it. Redtails are particularly fond of road kill.

During the breeding season, the avid birder may be lucky enough to witness one of the more spectacular mating displays in the raptor world. Redtails will dive and swoop around each other at altitude, extending their legs; occasionally grasping and swirling around each other briefly in an acrobatic dance. These hawks are monogamous and often mate for life.

The couple builds a large (3 ft across and 6 deep) nest of branches high up in a tree, cliff, or platform with a commanding view of their territory. The female will lay 1-5 eggs in early summer, and incubate them for a month. The male feeds her during this period. Raising the hatchlings takes another 4-6 weeks, including teaching them to hunt. Juveniles need to hone their hunting skills quickly, before winter makes prey scarce, consequently each couple only has one brood per season.

Like most raptors, Redtails are migratory, but older, more settled birds will remain on their breeding grounds year round provided that food is available. The tendency toward warmer winters in Pennsylvania, as well as the construction of the interstate highway system, has resulted in more birds remaining year round. This does not mean that hawks do not migrate through Pennsylvania though; several thousand Redtails from northern habitats fly over the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary every fall on their way to warmer (and mousier) climates to the south.

While it is illegal to shoot any raptor, including Redtails, the greatest threat to this top predator is “accidental” and purposeful shooting. In previous generations, farmers considered their tendency to perch on and around farms to be an indication of their desire to take young livestock. Farmers labeled the Redtail a pest and often called them “chicken-hawks”. In truth a Redtail could only take small chicks, even if it was so inclined. Most likely, Redtails are interested in farm buildings because of the ready supply of rodents. Other than illegal shootings and collisions with autos, the only real predator that the redtail has is the Great Horned Owl. For more information on raptors, and to help in their conservation, visit www.hawkmountainsanctuary.org. If you haven't visited the Kempton, PA sanctuary, it's well worth your time.

