

By Mary Hoff

Meet

Minnesota's nine hawk species

Your

have a lot in common—but

Local

plenty to tell them apart, too.

Hawks



Northern harrier

MICHAEL FURTMAN



MICHAEL FURTMAN

Red-tailed hawk

On the side of the road, a big bird perches on a power pole, silent as a statue. Suddenly it plunges to the ground below. In a flash of feathers, an unsuspecting shrew has become a tasty meal for a red-tailed hawk.

Hawks are premier predators of the bird world. They survive by capturing and eating rodents, frogs, insects, birds, and other small animals. And they are well-equipped for the job! Their outsized, front-facing eyes allow them to see tiny things far away and in 3D. In place of toenails, their feet have needle-sharp hooked talons that can quickly snatch and cling tightly to a prospective meal. Their large, curved beaks have a point at the end that can stab and tear their prey into bite-sized bits.

Minnesota is home to nine species of hawks. To many people, they might look a lot alike. But once you know where to look and what to look for, you can become an expert at identifying—and introducing

your friends to—these magnificent birds.

Three Types. Minnesota's hawks come in three main kinds: buteos, accipiters, and one harrier. Buteos, which are common in both forests and more open spaces, have large, wide wings they use to soar high above the ground in search of rodents and other prey. Accipiters, which often live in forests, have short wings and long tails that help them steer as they chase songbirds on the wing in between trees. They often fly with a flap-flap-glide rhythm. The harrier, a hawk of open country, hunts by flying low to the ground. It has long wings and a long tail it uses to glide while looking for small mammals and birds.

As you learn to identify hawks, keep in mind that immature hawks can look very different from their parents. If you see a hawklike bird that doesn't fit any of the descriptions here, there's a good chance it's a young one.

BUTEOS



BILL MARCHEL. INSET: MICHAEL FURTMAN.

Broad-Winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*)

The broad-winged hawk lives throughout Minnesota, but you're most likely to spy it in forests in the northeastern or southeastern parts of the state. It often hunts by perching in a tree, waiting for a mouse, snake, or other small animal to scamper or slither by. Other meals include frogs, toads, and insects.

A broad-winged hawk is a relative-

ly small but pudgy raptor, often seen perched in trees or on power lines. Adults have a brown back and a light-colored front, but some are darker than others. The alternating dark-and-light tail—two light bands and two dark bands—can be a helpful identification clue. This hawk fans out its tail feathers in flight.

Fun Fact: Broad-winged hawks migrate in flocks to Central and South America to spend the winter there. In 2003, counters at Hawk Ridge in Duluth, a common spot for spying migrating hawks, tallied a record 160,703 broad-winged hawks flying south in the fall—including more than 100,000 in a single day!



COURTESY OF HOLDEN SMITH. INSET: SPARKY STENSAAS.

Red-Shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*)

This medium-sized buteo is not common in Minnesota. You are most likely to see it in the east-central part of the state, including the Twin Cities area. It likes to hang out in deciduous forests near rivers or wetlands. Like the broad-winged hawk, the red-shouldered hawk often hunts by perching in a tree or on another tall object and waiting for a meal to show up below. Its prey includes

small mammals, amphibians, reptiles, ducklings, and other birds.

The red-shouldered hawk has a banded tail, with more bands than the broad-winged hawk. The very tip of the tail and the wings are light-colored. As its name suggests, it has a rust-colored chest and shoulders. It also has red near its “wrist”—the joint in the wing that is most forward in flight.

Fun Fact: Red-shouldered hawks may return to the same nest year after year. They sometimes line their nest with a soft evergreen branch before laying their eggs.



MICHAEL FURTMAN. INSET: MICHAEL FURTMAN.

Red-Tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

You could call the red-tailed hawk the robin or chickadee of Minnesota hawks—it’s found pretty much everywhere. It loves to hang out on roadsides and in other open areas that have trees, power poles, light posts, and other tall objects for perching. A bigger bird than the broad-winged hawk and the red-shouldered hawk, the red-tailed hawk tends to eat bigger food as well. Rabbits, squirrels, and snakes make up its

meals, along with small rodents and birds. Most red-tailed hawks migrate to warmer places for the winter, but at least a few can be found in the southern part of the state throughout the year.

It can be a little hard to identify this big buteo because it comes in nine different color variations ranging from light to dark. The large size and orangish tail can often help you distinguish it from other hawks.

Fun Fact: Unlike many other birds, red-tailed hawks often mate for life.



RYAN PENNISI. INSET: MICHAEL FURTMAN.

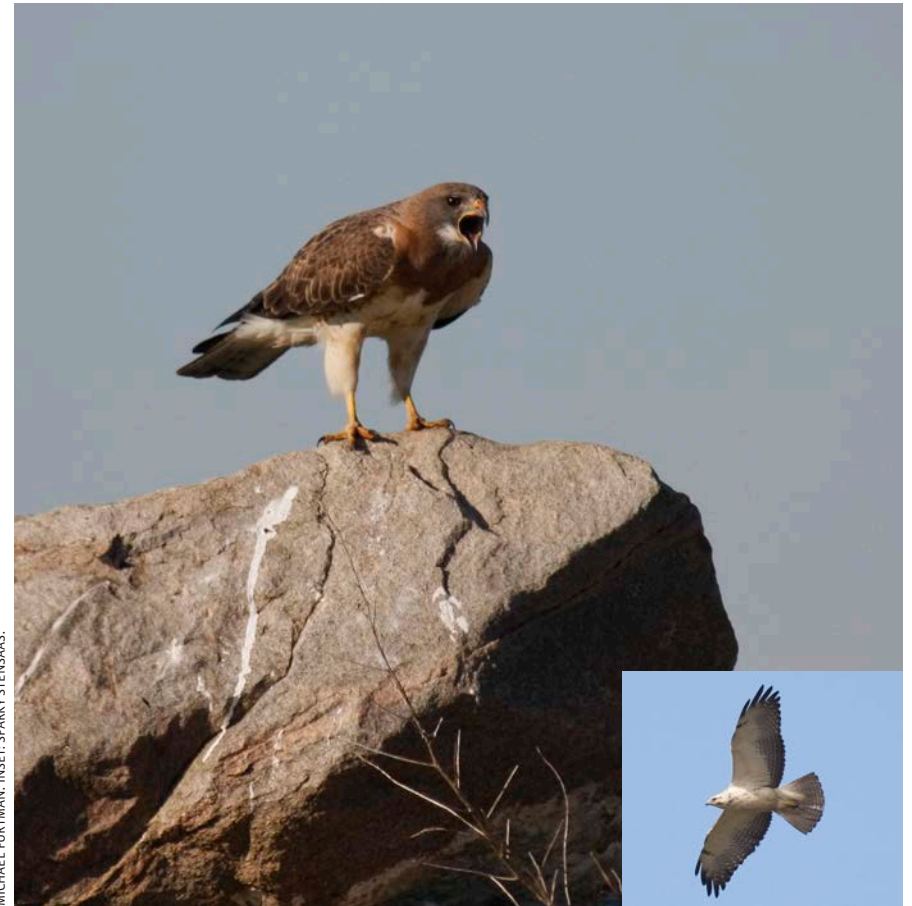
Rough-Legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*)

This big hawk lives in the Arctic during the summer and flies south to various places, including Minnesota, for winter. It hangs out mainly in open places rather than forests and feasts on mice and other small animals.

This hawk's name offers a clue to one of its identifying traits: Fluffy feathers on its legs and the tops of its feet give it a "rough-

legged" appearance. Look for white where the tail meets the body and dark feathers across the stomach and near the wrist part of the wing. While flying around in search of prey, the rough-legged hawk tends to soar or hover without flapping its wings. When flying, the wingtips tend to be higher than the place where the wings meet the body.

Fun Fact: Research suggests that rough-legged hawks can use their ability to see ultraviolet light to find voles, which produce urine that glows under UV.



MICHAEL FURTMAN. INSET: SPARKY STENSAAS.

Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*)

Swainson's hawk is a denizen of open places. It is most commonly found in southwestern Minnesota, where it hunts for insects and mice in open fields. It might pounce on them on the fly, but you also might see a Swainson's hawk chasing a grasshopper or mouse across

the ground with its wings outstretched. This hawk of the prairie has a dark brown back and chest, with lighter feathers on its lower front. When it perches, the tips of its wing feathers reach past the end of its tail. Up close, look for a dark beak with yellow near the face.

Fun Fact: The Swainson's hawk is a super migrator! It flies in large flocks up to 17,000 miles from the northern hemisphere to its wintering grounds in Argentina.

ACCIPITERS



RYAN PENNESI. INSET: MARK CHAPPELL.

Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*)

You're most likely to spot a Cooper's hawk in the southeastern and south-central parts of the state, including the Twin Cities metro area. It nests in forests. Its favorite foods include songbirds and other small birds, which it sometimes hunts at backyard bird feeders. It also eats rodents such as chipmunks and squirrels.

A grayish back with a lighter-colored front will help you identify this hawk. Darker feathers on the top of its head provide a good clue, too, as do three dark bands on the tail, an orange-red eye, and yellow legs. In flight, look for a long tail with a curved edge, rounded wings, and the banded tail.

Fun Fact: Cooper's hawks kill their prey by squeezing them with their feet.



MICHAEL FURTMAN. INSET: MICHAEL FURTMAN.

American Goshawk (*Accipiter atricapillus*)

This uncommon hawk is found mainly in northern and central Minnesota during the breeding season. However, it might live in other parts of the state during winter months. It loves big forests with big trees, especially coniferous ones. Favorite foods include birds, squirrels, and rabbits. You might see an

American goshawk chasing other birds through the woods, weaving rapidly between tree trunks.

The goshawk is mainly gray, but darker on the back than on the belly. Red eyes and a white "eyebrow" will help you identify this hawk of the forest. A band of white where the body meets the tail is a good clue, too.

Fun Fact: "Goshawk" is a shortened version of "goose hawk." This bird has been known to capture prey that weighs twice as much as it does.



SPARKY STENSAS. INSET: MICHAEL FURTMAN.

Sharp-Shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*)

This elusive bird of the north woods nests in deep forests in northeastern Minnesota, though it is commonly seen flying during migration. It mainly eats other forest birds, chasing them on the wing while using its long tail to maneuver between trees. Like the Cooper's hawk, it occasionally shows up at bird feeders in

search of an easy meal. It plucks the feathers out of its catch before eating it.

Gray on top and light rust below, the sharp-shinned hawk also looks a lot like a Cooper's hawk. However, it is smaller and has a flat rather than curved end to its tail. Yellow legs and yellow eyes are helpful identification clues.

Fun Fact: Legs that are pinched together in front earned the sharp-shinned hawk its name.

TEACHERS RESOURCES. Find a Teachers Guide and other resources for this and other Young Naturalists stories at mndnr.gov/young_naturalists.

HARRIER



BILL MARCHEL. INSET: RYAN PENNESI.

Northern Harrier (*Circus hudsonius*)

The northern harrier, also known as a marsh hawk, is found throughout Minnesota, but more likely in the south than in the north in winter. It prefers grassy areas and wetlands to forests and builds its nest on the ground. You might see it cruising along at a low altitude as it searches for mice, toads, snakes, insects,

and other small animals.

Like the sharp-shinned hawk, the northern harrier has yellow legs and eyes. Its overall body shape is long and lanky, and it has a white spot where its tail meets its body. The female is brown while the male is gray with dark wingtips and a banded tail. ✓

Fun Fact: The northern harrier hunts by sound as well as sight. Feathers on its face help channel sound toward its ears.