

# Swainson's Hawk



## Classification

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Phylum:** Chordata

**Class:** Aves

**Order:** Falconiformes

**Family:** Accipitridae

**Genus:** *Buteo*

**Species:** *swainsoni*



## Range, Habitat, Conservation Status

- **Range:** Spend most of the year in the western United States extending into southwest Canada and south to west Texas. In the winter months, they migrate over Central America to the La Pampas region of Argentina.
- **Habitat:** Prefer open habitats for foraging. Although much of their native prairie and grassland habitat has been converted to crop and grazing land, these hawks have adjusted well to agricultural settings.
- **Conservation Status:** Least Concern

## Physical Characteristics

- **Body Length:** 18.9 to 22.1 inches (48-56 cm)
- **Wingspan:** 4 to 4.5 feet (1.2-1.37 m)
- **Weight:** 24.4 to 48.2 ounces (693-1367 g)
- **Lifespan:** Up to 19 years in the wild.
- **Identifying Traits:** Though they can be quite variable, most are light-bellied birds with a dark or reddish-brown chest and brown or gray upperparts. They have distinctive underwings with white wing linings that contrast strongly with blackish flight feathers. Most males have gray heads while females tend to have brown heads.

## Behaviors

- **Feeding:** Eat mainly mammals and insects.
- **Breeding:** Breeding season starts with the building of nests in March and April. The young hatch between March and July.
- **Nesting:** Monogamous and usually return to the same nest site year after year. Whether they build a new nest or refurbish an old one, the nest is a



platform made of large sticks with twigs, weeds, or grass, lined with inner bark and fresh green leaves from surrounding trees. Some nests have flower clusters of willows, lichens, or down feathers shed by the hawk.

- **Migration:** Long-distance migrant, with most going to southern South America for the winter. Often migrate in large flocks.
- **Call:** Long, plaintive, whistled "kreee".

## Resident Bird(s)

**Name:** Travis

- **Age:** Hatched in 2011
- **Sex:** Male
- **Background:** Transferred from another rehabilitation facility to CRC in 2012. Had fallen out of nest. Non-releasable due to unintentional overexposure to humans at an important development stage.\*
- **Unique Individual Traits:** Inquisitive, he loves people watching!

## Fun Facts!

- Mammals make up the bulk of the diet during breeding season, when adults prey on ground squirrels, gophers, mice, voles, and rabbits. When they're not breeding, Swainson's Hawks rely almost exclusively on insect prey, especially crickets, grasshoppers, and dragonflies, often catching and eating them on the wing.
- Groups of soaring or migrating hawks are called "kettles." When it comes to forming kettles, Swainson's Hawks are overachievers: they form flocks numbering in the tens of thousands, often mixing with Turkey Vultures, Broad-winged Hawks, and Mississippi Kites to create a virtual river of migrating birds.
- Nearly all Swainson's Hawks breeding in the eastern half of the range (east of the Rocky Mountains) are light in appearance. Darker-plumaged birds are more common in the West, although still in the minority, accounting for upwards of 10% of individuals.

## Importance

- The Swainson's Hawk is of special importance to farmers, both in North and South America. Some Swainson's Hawks will live entirely on insects and rodents that it catches in crop fields, thus alleviating some crop destruction for farmers.



## Sources

- [https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Buteo\\_swainsoni/](https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Buteo_swainsoni/)
- [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Swainsons\\_Hawk/id](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Swainsons_Hawk/id)
- <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/swainsons-hawk>
- <https://peregrinefund.org/explore-raptors-species/hawks/swainsons-hawk>
- <https://hawkwatch.org/raptor-id/raptor-id-fact-sheets/swainsons-hawk/>

\* This bird did not learn to behave in a species typical manner due to exposure to humans at a young age. This can occur when a well-meaning human attempts to care for a baby bird. By the time this human realized they were not best suited to raise a baby bird and called CRC, the bird had been exposed to humans too long and had not learned the required skills to survive in the wild, which it would have received from the bird's parents.