

# 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 with numbers increasing

## 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:** They have a stout body with broad wings. The wings are slightly pointed with one feather longer at the tip. They can be quite variable with light, intermediate and dark morphs. Light morphs have a light belly and a dark or reddish-brown marking on the chest with brown or gray upperparts. Dark forms can be all dark on the belly. All forms have distinctive underwings with white to light wing linings that contrast with blackish flight feathers. Most males have gray heads while females tend to have brown heads. They soar with a slight dihedral or V-shape. They have prominent yellow legs.

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

### 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.

### Threats and Conservation measures

Conservation status is of least concern and numbers have recovered following declines from DDT pesticide exposure in 1970s and organophosphate use in Argentina in the 1990s. While numbers are increasing, threats include those associated with insect declines, pesticide use, and long migrations (climate change, electrocutions and collisions). Mortalities due to collisions with airplanes and electric pylons are common. Many airports have conservation programs to



manage and minimize collisions with raptors, while conservation centers are working with utility companies to retrofit existing power poles by installing insulating covers, installing perch shields and adding safe artificial nesting platforms. Visitors can help by refraining from pesticide use to help insect populations recover from dramatic declines.

## Sources

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