

The Central Park Red-Tailed Hawks

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Fledging!

Part 2 in a series



Welcome. Perched nearby are some young Red-tailed Hawks that were raised in a nest on a 5th Avenue building that overlooks Central Park. These fledgling hawks made their first flights in early June, when they were 45-50 day old. Feel free to watch them, and ask questions — that is the best way to learn more about these birds. However, please do not stand directly underneath the perched hawks and stay at least 20 feet away. If you see an injured hawk on the ground, keep it in sight, try and keep others away, and have someone call the New York City Hot line at 311. Someone should come quickly to investigate the problem.

The Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) is a bird of prey (raptor) that is a familiar to many in the New York City region. Within our urban parks, the Red-tail is the most common and easily seen raptor throughout the year. It does well here because there is an abundance of food in the form of pigeons, squirrels and rats, and this hawk is fairly tolerant of people as well.

Red-tails, along with two falcon species, the Peregrine and the American Kestrel, are predators that will nest on buildings in Manhattan. Another raptor, the Barn Owl, also nests in man-made structures in New York City, but not on Manhattan Island. In the remaining woodlands of the larger parks of New York City, we also have nesting Cooper's Hawks, Great Horned Owls and even Eastern Screech-Owls. Most individuals of these seven nesting species will remain here year-round. A few other raptor species such as Long-eared Owls and Saw-whet Owls will often winter here in Central Park or in suitable habitats in the five boroughs. And during the fall migration season, at least five additional hawk

species including the Merlin (a falcon) and the Marsh Hawk will often be fall or winter residents in New York City. Although hawks and owls are not closely related taxonomically, these birds are all referred to as "raptors," since they attack and capture prey with the sharp talons of their feet. Again, abundant food attracts them, and these raptors will remain here in New York City for a few days or even several months.

If you have the opportunity to view the perched young Red-tailed Hawks closely, either through your binoculars or someone's spotting scope, there are several important features to look for. First, note the size of the feet and especially the large talons. These are the most important weapons for prey capture that any hawk or owl possesses. Second, the immature birds have a brown tail with fine barring. They will not develop the characteristic red tail of the adults until their second summer (next year) at the earliest. The "belly band" or chocolate streaking across the breast will be retained throughout life and is a key field mark in identifying this species when seen overhead in flight. Female Red-tailed Hawks are about one-third larger than males, having a wingspan from 48 to 54 inches (120 to 140 cm.), and weigh from 33 to 50 ounces (925 to 1,415 grams). By comparison, fully grown males have a wingspan up to 45 inches (115 cm.) and weigh 27.5 to 39 ounces (780-1,000 gm.).

(and the tail will turn reddish). The eyes of all raptors are their most well-developed sense.

Birds of prey are estimated to be able to see between three and eight times the distance that humans can, and they can resolve fine details better as well. And Red-tailed Hawk eyes are huge! They are about the size of human eyes, and cannot move from side to side. That is one reason why you will often see raptors bob their head up and down. This behavior allows a hawk to more accurately judge the distance between near and far objects, thereby improving depth perception.

Since 1995, juveniles raised by the Central Park Red-tailed Hawks have been making their initial flight from the nest in early to mid-June. Whether the adults encourage or teach the young to fly or hunt is open to debate. For their first few days out of the nest, the young birds (also called fledglings) remain perched on the buildings or in the upper branches of the elm trees along 5th Avenue. At this time, fledglings begin to glide and soar more often, but do not have much stamina for sustained or powered (flapping) flight. The most difficult maneuver is learning how to land properly. Indeed it will take much practice for the young hawks to master the graceful swoop up to a perch with gentle landing that the adults perform so effortlessly. Meanwhile, the fledglings can be seen cautiously parachuting down toward their



Soaring on
a Thermal



Wings
"tucked"
for speed

Note also the yellow iris of the young birds. During the next 12-18 months, the iris will turn a deep brown color as the birds mature

intended perch, upon which crashes are not uncommon. Similarly, in direct flight when approaching a building ledge, juveniles often

misjudge their speed, resulting in impacts that can cause injury. In previous years, the best place to watch the young birds soaring at eye level has been from the roof top garden at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on 5th Avenue. Days with a moderate wind are best. Both the adults and juveniles enjoy the high perches of the buildings from 72nd to 79th Streets to watch happenings down below them in Central Park.



In summer, along 5th Avenue in the area between 76th and 79th Streets, young Red-tails take refuge from the heat in the shade of the trees. The fledglings can often be heard calling to their parents for food, sometimes noisily and persistently. From mid-June through mid-July, the juveniles are sometimes fed in these trees and the ones at 79th Street (East) near the playground with the three bears. Rats, pigeons, squirrels and young birds comprise the bulk of their diet. Most prey captures occur before 10am or after 5pm. The adults catch many of the prey items in the area of 79th Street, sometimes near the glass walls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Also, if you see a flock of pigeons circling together in the sky above 5th Avenue, there is probably an adult Red-tail trying to catch them in mid-air.

Beginning in late June, the young hawks practice their own hunting techniques. At first they can be seen instinctively attacking small branches and twigs with their talons and beaks, in the manner of playful kittens and puppies. By 25 days after leaving the nest, short flights are made at rats, squirrels, robins, blue jays and the occasional pigeon on the ground. Some of the resulting interactions can be quite comical as squirrels dash around the trunk of a tree, leaving the hawk baffled as to the exact whereabouts of the prey. Also, though the young hawks can chase or dive for a potential meal, they are often at a loss as to exactly what to do once within striking range. Occasionally the prey will “turn the tables” on the fledglings, as when squirrels turn and chase young hawks, or robins and blue jays “mob” a Red-tail. In the

latter situation, the raucous calls of the smaller birds combined with repeated dives at the hawk’s head can drive it away. Occasionally, Kestrels, the smallest falcons in our city, may be seen diving at the Red-tailed Hawks along 5th Avenue. This is most common in June when young kestrels begin flying and their parents become more defensive.

By late August, the juvenile Red-tailed Hawks are becoming increasingly adroit at flying, and are capturing some of their own food. As a result, the young hawks begin to wander further from this area. Whether they remain in Central Park through the winter depends on the abundance of available prey in the size they like to catch as well as the number of other raptors that migrate into the park. It is also interesting to note that since about 2000, there have been several other Red-tailed Hawk pairs that have nested on buildings in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Staten Island. Are they the offspring of the pair on 5th Avenue? No one knows for sure, but we find it very interesting that this pattern of using building ledges or fire escapes as a place to build a nest and raise young is on the increase in our area.

In previous years in Manhattan during autumn and winter, a good place to look for the young and adult Red-tails has been in other small green spaces nearby, including Riverside, Morningside, St. Nicholas and Jackie Robinson parks. The area along the West Side Highway from Inwood Hill Park south to about 79th Street has been a popular foraging site for these raptors for many years. Near City College at 135th Street and Broadway, Red-tails have been observed capturing pigeons on the roofs of apartment buildings. Indeed any area with abundant prey, moderate levels of human activity and enough room to maneuver can attract a hunting Red-tailed Hawk.

By late summer, other hawks are making their way south via New York City. This season from mid-August through mid-December is the time of the migration of raptors, the greatest movement of land-based predators on earth. The parks of New York City become magnets for hawks that stop to refuel on abundant prey populations before pushing onward again. In Central Park it is possible to see migrating hawks. The best place to view them is the third floor outdoor observation deck of Belvedere Castle. *Days when winds are from the northwest bring the greatest diversity of species and number of migrants.* Most migrating raptors pass over our area from mid-September through late October in autumn. Other migrants include Bald Eagles, Ospreys, Turkey Vultures, Cooper’s Hawks and Broad-winged Hawks.

New York City and its parks are not an unusual place to watch raptors or to study the environment. The raptors and other predators that live in our parks and above our streets exert a constant and valuable

check upon populations of rats, squirrels, pigeons, etc. As a result, sharp increases in the numbers of these animals are limited before other, more drastic forces such as disease, starvation, and/or competition take over.

The urban environment may be the most important one on earth. Cities embody the diversity and energy of human pursuits and have been remarkable engines of economic and social progress. It is this habitat of buildings, people and the occasional park which more than 75% of all Americans encounter each day. Those who will never see tropical species such as chocolate trees or the Resplendent Quetzal can still find animals that existed in New York City before people arrived some 10,000 years ago. Red-tailed Hawks are just one species. There are many others.

Nearby at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it is possible to see some of the important *cultural* works that our species has created. Here in Central Park, there is an abundance of plant and animal species which are part of our *biological* culture. Being able to distinguish a Peregrine Falcon from a Red-tailed Hawk, or an oak tree from an elm, is as important as seeing the difference between a Michelangelo and a daVinci. How we value the different cultures we encounter each day will determine their future. From the many ethnic neighborhoods, to the museums and parks: New York City is biodiversity.

Related NYC Raptor Literature

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