

The Central Park Red-Tailed Hawks

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NESTING!

Part 1 in a series

Welcome to the Red-tailed Hawk nest at 74th Street and 5th Avenue. Since 1995, Red-tails have laid eggs and raised their young here. For more than a decade, people from all over the world have stopped in to watch this pair, and — more recently — another pair, nesting on a building near Central Park South. Nearby there are many bird watchers who may have set up their spotting scopes to get a better look at these hawks and their nest. Ask them if you can have a look, and please ask questions if you want to know more.



The Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) is a bird of prey (raptor) that primarily inhabits open woods, fields and farmland in the northeastern United States. As long as there is an abundance of food, this hawk will remain through the fall and winter months in our region, and it is especially fond of living here in New York City. In North America, this species is widely distributed, breeding from Alaska to Newfoundland, south to Texas, southern California and Florida. Further south, Red-tailed Hawks nest in the mountains of Mexico, Central America and many islands in the Caribbean Sea. In New York City, these hawks can be found nesting on buildings in Manhattan and the Bronx. However, this is unusual. More often, these hawks nest in trees in our parks in each of the five boroughs, such as Inwood Hill Park in Manhattan, Prospect Park in Brooklyn, Van Cortlandt and Pelham Bay Parks in the Bronx, the Greenbelt in Staten Island, and Alley Pond Park in Queens. Two other resident raptor species of this city, the American Kestrel and the Peregrine Falcon, usually nest on buildings and other man-made structures. By contrast, the Great Horned Owl and the Eastern Screech-Owl, though preferring the same habitat as the Red-tailed Hawk, only nest in trees in certain parks of New York City.

Here at 74th Street and 5th Avenue the nest was built by both the male and female and has been re-used year after year. Material is carried most often in late January through early March by the male in his beak, and he may continue this activity throughout the nesting season. The female spends the majority of her time forming the nest, which measures approximately 60 inches (160 cm) across, with a bowl for the eggs 12-16 inches (30-40 cm) deep. Whether Red-tails build their nests on buildings or in trees, there are three important factors they must consider: first, aerial access to the nest has to be straightforward so that landing with prey is easy. There must also be enough room for the growing young to stretch and exercise their wings. Second, the nest site should provide good views of the surrounding area to facilitate detection of approaching nest predators such as crows. Generally, the nest should be within sight of several prominent perching areas, where the adults can move in order to simultaneously look for food while keeping an eye on their young. Finally, a suitable hunting territory that supports an abundance of prey to feed the growing young must be fairly near.

In New York City, the initial stages of courtship begin on mild days of late January and February as the pair circles high above the selected home territory. The male often rises in the sky above the female, and with dangling legs he may touch her back in mid-air. Usually her reactions are passive, but occasionally she will roll over and present her talons upward. Alternately, as the female is perched, the male may rise to a tremendous height and then dive toward the earth, checking his descent and rising again in a roller coaster display. Once the pair bond is re-established (and this usually lasts for life), the next stage of the nesting season begins. By about 10 March, the female will lay a set of 2-3 eggs at this nest that will hatch in approximately five weeks time (by 20 April). During the incubation period, the male usually brings food to the nest, which the female accepts and carries to a nearby perch to consume. The male will then sit on the eggs for intervals of 15 minutes and occasionally up to three hours. However, the female does the vast majority of the incubating, beginning with the laying of the first egg.

Hatching of the eggs in mid-April heralds the onset of a very busy period for the adults who must bring on average 12-24 ounces (340-680 grams) of food per young per day to the nest. In Central Park, pigeons and rats comprise the bulk of the diet, along with squirrels and young birds such as Blue Jays and House Sparrows. It is not uncommon to see the male hunting pigeons in the vicinity of the nest. Some are caught on the wing as the male flies into an oncoming flock and simply spears one with the talons of an outstretched foot. This is an unusual hunting technique employed by Red-tails here in New York City. At other times the male may fly into a tree filled with pigeons and pin one to the trunk or branches. In fact, an easy way to locate a Red-tail is to look for a flock of circling pigeons. Often the pigeons will

flock together in flight for protection against a raptor such as these hawks or a Peregrine Falcon. By comparison, Red-tails hunt rats, mice and squirrels from a favorite perch where they look for movement. Whatever the prey, it is usually the female who feeds shredded pieces to the young until they are able to feed themselves in about the third to fourth week after hatching. By feeding upon common urban animals, Red-tailed Hawks provide a valuable and free pest control service for the people of the city. Also, the remaining pigeons and squirrels are helped too: there is more food for them and more places to nest as well.



13-15 days old

In late May, as the young approach 30 days of age, they can be seen flapping their wings in the nest. They also preen the last of the downy white feathers from their backs and head region. They will not develop the characteristic red tails of the adults until their second or even third summer, at which time their eye (iris) color will have changed from pale bluish to yellow to brown. As with many other raptor species, females are on average about 30% larger than males. (Overall, adult Red-tails have a 4-5 foot wingspan.)

The young finally leave the nest in June, about 45-49 days after hatching (roughly 80 days after the first egg was laid). They continue to be fed in the nest area by the adults into August. During this time they begin catching some of their own food. Young squirrels, rats and small birds are especially attractive prey items for the young hawks during this "fledgling" stage. In past years, the best place to watch the young hawks hunting has been in the meadow and open woods to the east of Cedar Hill, just south of the 79th Street/5th Avenue entrance to Central Park. It is not unusual to see the young birds walking or running on the ground, sometimes chasing one another. Also, the

youngsters like to play with sticks on the ground, much like kittens play with string. If you are especially lucky, a young Red-tail will fly low across the path in front of you to chase a squirrel on the ground. In this way, the young birds practice and hone their hunting skills in late summer.



25-27 days old

By September, other Red-tailed Hawks are heading south in migration. Indeed this season from mid-August through early December marks one of the great nature events in our region. It is the time of the migration of hawks, the greatest movement of land-based predators on earth. If you are lucky and keep your eyes on the sky, it is possible to see several hundred to a few thousand hawks in migration over Central Park. The most commonly seen migrants are Broad-winged Hawks, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Ospreys and Turkey Vultures. We even get Bald Eagles passing over Central Park, and — perhaps once every other year — a Golden Eagle will pass over as well. The best nearby viewing spot to watch migrating raptors is Belvedere Castle, located just south of the Great Lawn. The best time in the autumn to look for migrants is from mid-September through mid-October. The best days for viewing are cool, dry ones with some clouds **and winds from the NORTHWEST.**

Strange as it may seem at first glance, the Red-tailed Hawks of Central Park have an almost ideal habitat in which to nest and feed. There is abundant prey available throughout the year. The nest on the building overlooks the surrounding area, isolated from potential predators. For us the message is clear: these Central Park Red-tails show that, if people are the primary threat to wildlife, people are also their best hope. The hawks could not have survived through the years if people did not enjoy watching them and altering their actions

just a little to accommodate these magnificent birds. In the long term, how we value these hawks and the other wild creatures that inhabit New York City will determine their future. Globally, most people live in cities, and this trend is expected to continue well into the 21st century. Choices made by people who live in cities will determine what happens to the rainforests, coral reefs and other wild places left on earth. In such disparate cities as Eilat in Israel, Istanbul in Turkey or even Vera Cruz in Mexico, people are watching hawks. It is an activity that links us with people in the rest of the world. We hope you choose to follow these hawks through the season, as well as the - others that will follow on their wing tips in migration this autumn.



30-33 days old

Related NYC Raptor Literature

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