Living with Red-Tailed Hawks

by Kelly Coffey



Photo source: Pexels, by Ron Graham Becker

In recent years, I have gotten to know the habits and behaviors of red-tailed hawks from a couple that have taken up residence on my farm. Red-tailed hawks are widespread and relatively common, being found throughout North America. Their most recognizable characteristic by the general public would have to be their call, because it is frequently used in movies and TV shows when the producers want an audio background to illustrate a wild area. You might say the red-tailed hawk call is the sound of wilderness. It goes kree-eee-ar and descends in pitch. (Unfortunately, media creators sometimes attribute the call to a bald eagle, which sounds nothing like it.) It is a very distinctive sound, aggressive and long-lasting, which is probably why it is so popular in TV and the movies. It never fails to turn my head when I hear it.

Red-tailed hawks (Buteo jamaicensis) favor a park-like environment where they can perch in trees to scan the surrounding open space for prey. Like other raptors, the eyes of a red-tailed

hawk are large in proportion to the rest of its body. The eyes can see at much greater detail and longer distances than humans. My farm contains many bamboo poles reaching over ten feet tall that I use to support deer netting to protect my crops. The hawks occasionally use these poles for perching. Their diet is varied- mice, snakes, rabbits, ground squirrels, and other birds. They will even eat insects such as grasshoppers. In the fall and winter, a hawk needs to consume about six to eight mice per day or a rabbit every four to six days. Their intake is slightly less during the spring and summer. A red-tailed hawk is not above stealing crow nestlings to eat. In the spring, I sometimes see a group of crows harassing a red-tailed hawk in flight in an effort to keep it away from their nests. The hawk seems unconcerned though, and keeps on soaring as if the crows weren't there.



A captive red-tailed on exhibit at Grandfather Mountain. Photo by Kelly Coffey

I have a field planted in cover crop rye. Lately, I've noticed red-tailed hawks perched on the bordering bamboo poles more frequently than usual. The rye has gone to seed. I suspect that the grain is attracting rodents, which are, in turn, attracting the hawks. I usually mow the rye before it matures, but this year I've decided to leave it alone so as to provide the red-tails with more opportunity for catching prey. I get a lot of satisfaction knowing that I've somewhat inadvertently created an ideal feeding habitat for red-tails with the poles and the nearby rye crop.



Red-tailed hawk looking for prey on a bamboo pole on my farm. Photo by Kelly Coffey

Red-tails have a wingspan of a little over four feet and measure 18-25 inches from beak to the tip of their tail feathers. Females are bigger than males. Color varies with population groups. Some populations range from almost white to some having many black feathers at the other extreme. The ones I see on my farm tend to be on the lighter side.

Red-tailed hawks mate for life. They start with an elaborate courtship ritual where they soar around each other mid-air and sometimes lock talons. They begin building their nests by March with both male and female working on nest construction. Red-tails return to the same nesting area every year and often reuse the same nest. The female lays two to three eggs and does most of the incubation, although the male will relieve the female for a few hours in a day and provide her with food. Incubation lasts 28-35 days. The chicks are hatched with a white, fluffy down that is gradually replaced with feathers as they grow. The female stays on the nest to brood the chicks; i.e. protect them from the weather. The male continues to provide the female with food, as well as the chicks. He will bring prey to the nest or drop it off nearby and the female will tear it apart and feed it to the chicks. By the time the chicks are 45 days old, they are ready to leave the nest. One year in mid-July, I began hearing a distinctive screech on my farm that was persistent over several days. Curious as to what was making the sound, I recorded it and emailed the recording to Curtis Smalling, executive director of Audubon North Carolina, asking if he could identify the bird. Here is what he said, "Those are juvenile calls of red-tailed hawk. A little different than the adult scream but very commonly heard from now into August. They are now being weaned by their parents and are hungry. We typically hear these juvenile calls well into August. They are basically begging to be fed."



A red-tailed hawk I found standing in my driveway. Note that it has caught a rabbit. Photo by Kelly Coffey

Two factors that determine the density of a red-tailed hawk population are food supply and suitable nesting sites. In one sense, red-tails are not picky about nesting sites (they've been known to nest on manmade structures such as utility poles), but the sites have to be elevated and close to an open area with adequate prey. Under ideal conditions, one might find a nesting pair every half square mile.

Red-tailed hawk migration in this part of the country, to the extent that it occurs at all, is a bit complicated. Hawks here in the mountains will stay put if the winter is not too bad and there is no snow cover. Snow and harsh weather will drive them down in elevation, but not too far. This is known as facultative migration. Facultative migration is characteristic of hawks from Pennsylvania south, who will set off in different directions to avoid winter conditions. Added to this pattern is the fact that birds from the northern states and

Canada do migrate south and so are often found here alongside resident birds. According to Curtis Smalling, “We can get a mix of birds from the north and our local birds moving around looking for good food supply. They usually come back as early as possible and if there is no snow cover, they may never leave.”

The life span of a red-tailed hawk is not well-studied, but the oldest captive lived over 29 years. The oldest wild one (determined by banding) was over 23 years old. However, it’s important to note that over 50% of red-tails will not survive a year after hatching. Thereafter, their odds improve but the average annual mortality rate is estimated to be about 20%.

Most of my encounters with red-tailed hawks have been at a distance- soaring high overhead or perched on a tall pole. But one day as I was walking through my pasture, one swooped low near my head. It was positioned so that the sunlight filtered through those red tail feathers, giving them a scarlet glow. I was grateful for the opportunity to get a close-up view of such a majestic bird in flight.

Source for information other than my own experience: Wild Bird Guides: Red-tailed Hawk by Charles R. Preston, Stackpole Books, 2000.