

1981

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### Recommended Citation

Duecker, Steve (1981) "Help Keep Hawks in Hawkeye Land," *Iowa Science Teachers Journal*: Vol. 18: No. 3, Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/istj/vol18/iss3/2>

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# HELP KEEP HAWKS IN HAWKEYE LAND

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## Introduction

Many people have watched a hawk soar on a warm spring day. As the hawk turns lazy circles in the sky, he is riding currents of air that push him up. Not much hunting is done from this soar.

Hawks are equipped with strong feet and sharp claws called talons. These are for capturing and killing their food. Their hooked beak is used to tear the food up for swallowing. Hawks have ear openings and can hear fairly well. The eyes of the hawk are about eight times more powerful than a human's and are especially built to detect movement of little animals.

Hawks are covered with a layer of feathers for insulation. They are warmblooded with a body temperature of about 100° F. Feathers are a perfect covering for a bird. They are light and provide warmth. Bird's bones are also very light because they are hollow. This lightness allows the hawk to fly.

Hawks moult their feathers once a year, usually in the spring. The feathers are moulted a few at a time so that the hawk can sustain flight. Many hawks have dull, drab plumage their first year and moult a more attractive one in the following spring. The dull plumage provides better camouflage for young hawks.

Most hawks nest once a year in the spring. Being a predator, their reproductive rate is lower than prey animals. In the larger hawks, one to two offspring is the average brood. Smaller hawks usually raise three to four young.

Most hawks build nests of sticks in trees. These are usually bulky and flat on the top. Baby hawks usually hatch around 30 days after the female starts to incubate. It takes the young about 30 to 40 days to mature. They are usually helped in hunting by the parents for several weeks after that.

Many of the larger hawks pair for life and nest in the same area for many years. Some captive hawks have lived to be over 25 years old. Most of the young hawks migrate in the fall of the first year. The adults often stay in the same territory all year.

## Redtail Hawk

Hawks most commonly seen soaring are the "broad winged" type. Of these, the most common is the Redtail Hawk. Redtail hawks are large birds with up to 3½ foot wingspread and weigh 1½ to 3½ lbs. Many of the adult birds overwinter in Iowa. The redtail nests in the edges of wood-

lands. Redtail nests should be left alone since the parents may abandon a disturbed nest.

The redtail is often called "chicken hawk," but this is an error since the bulk of their food consists almost entirely of rodents and other small animals. Redtails are extremely helpful to farmers in removing unwanted rodents from fields and should be protected everywhere. If hawks do attack domestic birds a local game warden should be consulted.

Adult redtails have red tails, while the juveniles have brown tails. Redtails perch in the open on dead twigs. This habit makes them tempting targets for unthinking people with guns.

### **American Kestrel**

Another commonly observed hawk in Iowa is the American Kestrel. The kestrel is a small, tame hawk about the size of a dove. Most kestrels migrate, although a few may overwinter in Iowa.

The diet of the kestrel is mainly grasshoppers and mice. Occasionally a few birds are taken during the nesting season and in winter.

Kestrels nest in old woodpecker holes in trees. Sometimes they will nest on cavities and ledges of buildings. They will also use nest boxes that are 8 x 8 inches and about a foot deep. The entrance hole should be of 3 inch diameter and the box placed at least 20 feet high. Small nail kegs with a 3 inch hole are also acceptable.

### **Other Hawks**

Other hawks commonly cited in Iowa include the Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk and Rough-legged Hawk. Less commonly cited is the Eastern Goshawk, Krider's Hawk, Harlan's Hawk, and Prairie Falcon, among others.

### **Injured or Orphaned Hawks**

Iowans often find young hawks alone in the wild and assume that they have been deserted. This is a mistake, since most of the time, they are under the watchful eye of an unobserved parent. If a fallen nest is found and the young are still covered with down, a state wildlife biologist should be notified.

When an injured hawk is found, it should be placed in a large box with a lid and left undisturbed. Then, someone with the proper permit and knowledge should be contacted (see Table 1). The hawk should not be disturbed until help arrives.

### **Hawks and Education**

Hawks make excellent subjects for classroom discussion because they are essential in helping maintain environmental balances by controlling

the populations of some of the animals they eat. For example, they save farmers thousands of dollars each year by helping regulate harmful rodent populations.

**Table 1**

**Iowa Hotline for Injured Raptors**

Barb Binhammer Cedar Rapids, Iowa 319-377-8871	Darwin Koenig Decorah, Iowa 319-382-9458
Gene Burns Jamaica, Iowa 515-429-3215	Dean Roosa Ames, Iowa 515-281-8676
Steve Duecker Danbury, Iowa 712-883-2343	Tony Selch Roland, Iowa 515-388-4062
Russ Field Harlan, Iowa 712-755-5592	Dan Varland Clarinda, Iowa 712-542-5117
Charles Frisk Underwood, Iowa 712-566-2902	Joe Zawadowski Hubbard, Iowa 515-893-2227

Many years ago, hawks were considered detrimental because they included other birds in their diets. Now it is known that hawks are needed to keep some birds, including sparrows and starlings, from overpopulating. It is also known that hawks have no harmful effects on gamebird populations. Gamebirds are controlled by the amount of habitat available, not by the feeding of hawks.

The following instructional guide is included to assist teachers desiring to include hawk instruction in their curriculum. For further information, write: Iowa Raptor Society, Steve Duecker, Box 275, Danbury, Iowa 51019 or phone 712-883-2343. Help keep hawks in hawkeye land.

**Hawk Education Guide**

**Objectives:**

1. Give students a better understanding of raptors.
2. Prevent the shooting and abuse of raptors.
3. Examine the diet of raptors and analyze the role it plays in nature.
4. Learn the general types of raptors and how to observe them in nature.

### Facts:

1. The word raptor includes all predatory birds.
2. There are three main types of "hawks" buetoes, accipiters, and falcons.
3. Accipiters in North America are Goshawk, Cooper's Hawk, and Sharp-shinned Hawk.
4. Falcons in North America are Sparrowhawk or Kestrel, Prairie Falcon, Peregrine Falcon, and Gyrfalcon.
5. Buetoes are Redtail Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, Redshoulder Hawk, Roughlegged Hawk, Broadwinged Hawk and Ferruginous Hawk.
6. In birds-of-prey, the female is larger.
7. Eyesight in raptors is extremely well developed, especially to detect movement.
8. Raptors moult once a year in the spring. The moult is just a few feathers at a time.
9. Many raptors change plumage after moult.
10. There is a large restocking effort with the Peregrine Falcon.
11. Raptors have a low reproductive rate.
12. DDT causes eggshells in raptors to be thinner than usual thus disrupting reproduction.

### Activities:

1. Determine the hawks living in your community. When traveling in the country, become more observant of hawks. Check for hawks in old dead trees. Observe the bird with binoculars to see if it has a full crop. If it has a bulge just under its beak, its crop is full and it has just eaten. If the crop is empty, watch for awhile and you may see the hawk dive for its prey. In the city, watch for kestrels (sparrowhawks). They frequently are found around vacant lots, railroad tracks, and ditches. You may see them hovering, by flapping their wings rapidly.
2. Have students watch for these birds on trips and when riding the school bus. The students should record the bird's activity flying, perched, hunting, nesting, etc.
3. Have students make silhouettes of the three main types of hawks: Buetoes (redtail), Accipiters (goshawk), and Falcons (sparrowhawk). Hanging mobiles can be made from these silhouettes by using sewing thread and fine wire.
4. Have your students make circle graphs of various raptor's diets. Discuss the importance of these diets in maintaining environmental balances.
5. All hawks, owls, falcons, eagles, and vultures are protected by state and federal law. There are heavy fines and jail sentences for harming these birds. Have students make posters showing protected birds-of-prey, urging people not to shoot them. There are rewards for information leading to the conviction of hawk shooters.
6. Make a poster showing the difference between the kestrel (sparrowhawk) and the mourning dove. Post this in areas where dove are hunted, to help keep hunters from accidentally shooting kestrels.
7. Make life size drawings of hawks on poster board. The length and wingspread of hawks are found in many bird books.
8. Hawks and owls eat their prey and cast up pellets of material that cannot be digested. Usually this is hair, feathers, and bone. Look for pellets under a hawk's favorite perch, take them apart to see what the hawk has been eating.
9. Construct and disseminate nesting boxes for kestrels.

### References:

- Beebe, F.L. 1976. *Hawks, Falcons and Falconry*. Hancock House Publishers Ltd.
- Heintzelman, D.S. 1976. *A Guide to Eastern Hawk Watching*. Pennsylvania Univ. Press.