

Swainson's Hawk

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Buteo swainsoni* was named to honor William Swainson, a British naturalist and illustrator in the 1800s.

DESCRIPTION: The species exhibits many plumage variations, leading to a range of light and dark forms known as “color morphs.” Except during the darkest morphs, the underwing has a two-toned appearance, with a dark trailing edge that contrasts with the light coverts (the feathers that cover the forearm and the bases of the long flight feathers). Typical adults have a brown back, dark brown or gray head, whitish throat, dark breast, white belly (sometimes with dark markings) and grayish tail. The tail has many thin, dark bands and a wide, dark band at the tip. Juveniles have a brown head with pale markings, brown back with pale feather edging, creamy breast and belly with dark streaks, and gray or brown tail with narrow bands of equal width. These hawks are about 20 inches long, weigh an average of 2 pounds and have a wingspan of 4–4.5 feet. The wings are long and pointed.

DISTRIBUTION: Breeding range primarily extends from the Great Plains westward to open portions of the Pacific states, northern Mexico and southern Canada. In Arizona, these hawks are largely absent from the Sonoran and Mohave deserts, occurring in transitional grasslands in those areas. They most commonly breed in the southeastern grasslands of Cochise, Graham and Pima counties, with several other populations scattered across the northern half of the state. During migration, they occasionally stray to the eastern United States; however, they overwinter in South America, chiefly in Argentina.



ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZDINAK

As they migrate to South America during August through October, Swainson's hawks congregate in spectacular flocks of hundreds to thousands of individuals.

HABITAT: Grasslands are the preferred home of nesting and migrating Swainson's hawks. Desertscrub, agricultural and rural areas and other open habitats intermixed with grasslands also support some nesting pairs. They avoid heavily forested areas.

BIOLOGY: Their diet differs depending on prey availability, but Swainson's hawks eat a variety of rodents, rabbits, insects, birds, reptiles and even bats. When not breeding, they are well-known for eating insects such as large grasshoppers and capturing dragonflies in midair.

All but a few birds vacate North America for the winter. As they migrate

to South America during August through October, Swainson's hawks congregate in spectacular flocks of hundreds to thousands of individuals. They return to Arizona in March and April and select isolated, small to medium-sized trees, shrubs or even cactus for nests, then lay one to four eggs in late April and May. The young hatch a little over a month later and are ready to fly when they are 6 weeks old. After leaving the nest, they depend on the parents for another month or so before going on their own. Some exceptional Swainson's hawks have been known to live for more than 20 years, but most birds probably survive less than 10 years.

STATUS: In 2004, Partners in Flight estimated this hawk's population at 460,000 breeding birds in North America, with 4,000 in Arizona. At Veracruz, Mexico, about 700,000 individuals are estimated during autumn migration. The species has been reduced throughout its range with the loss or modification of its preferred native habitat, yet to some degree has adapted to agriculture. Recent increases in numbers at hawk migration watch sites indicate a possible recovery from the 1990s, when tens of thousands were found killed by pesticides on their South American wintering grounds.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Maintaining quality, native grasslands with a scattering of trees while reducing shrub invasion would support prey populations and ensure that appropriate habitat remains available for nesting. 🦅

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