

NATURE DETECTIVES

Winter 2013

A Red-tailed Hawk Named Kaya

Red-tailed hawks are our most common hawks. They can often be seen perched along highways or soaring over open fields. Kaya is a resident red-tailed hawk that can no longer fly free.

Kaya lives outdoors in a huge flight cage with other hawks at the Birds of Prey Foundation. Kaya came there as a young hawk, less than a year old. She had a severe head injury that blinded her in one eye. She even had to learn how to eat again.

Each year over 500 birds arrive from all over Colorado and other states to receive nursing care at the Birds of Prey Foundation. The dedicated staff members work hard treating injured or orphaned birds. When the birds are healthy and strong enough to survive on their own, they are released back into the wild.

Kaya can fly, but because of her injuries, she cannot hunt and could not survive in the wild. She now works at the rehabilitation facility, too. When orphaned, baby red-tailed hawks arrive, Kaya immediately takes over as their foster mom. She is a good mother so humans do not need to care for the babies. They will grow up wild and can go free, thanks to Kaya.

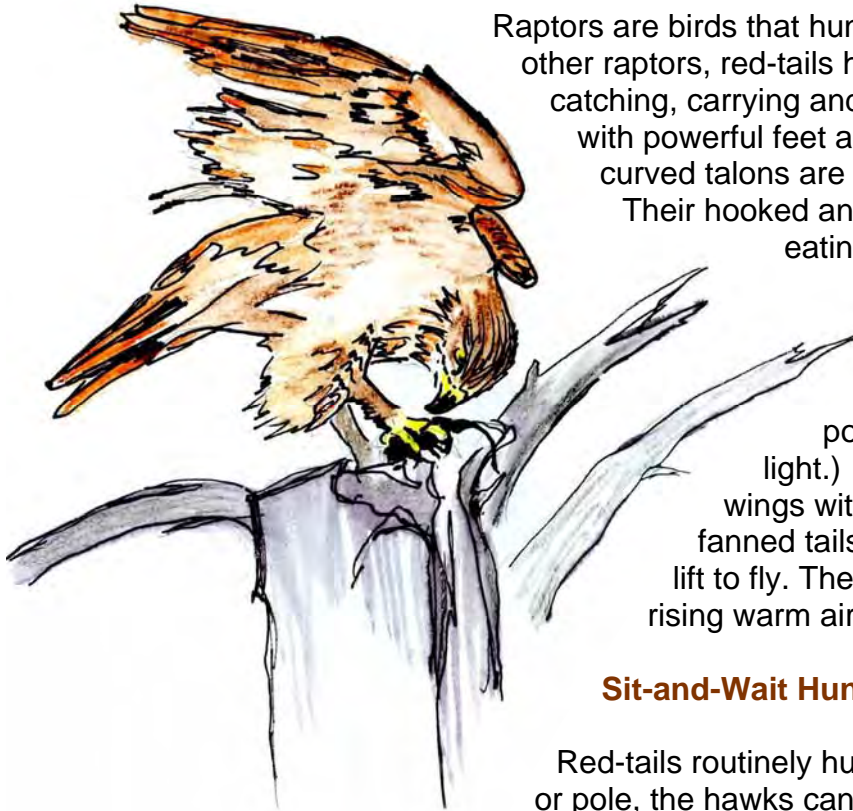
For more information on the nonprofit Birds of Prey Foundation check out their web site: www.birds-of-prey.org

Lucky Hawks Get Rescued

Birds need rescuing for many reasons. Baby hawks sometimes fall out of their nests. Juvenile red-tails are clumsy fliers and have a hard time catching prey. They instinctively know how to hunt and kill, but catching is tricky and dangerous. The young hawks often get injured or starve. Birds of all ages collide with windows and cars. Hawks are poisoned when they eat prey containing pesticides or lead shot. The average hawk lives to age 7 or 8. The luckiest might survive 20 years.



Red-tailed Hawks Are **Raptors**



Raptors are birds that hunt other animals for food. Like other raptors, red-tails have sturdy bodies built for catching, carrying and eating prey. They are big hawks with powerful feet and large talons. The sharp, curved talons are perfect tools for seizing prey. Their hooked and sharp-tipped beaks are ideal for eating meat.

Red-tails can weigh up to 3 pounds. (A little dog the size of a red-tailed hawk might weigh 30 pounds, but for flight you need to be light.) Red-tails have rounded, broad wings with a 4-foot wingspan and wide, fanned tails to give their large bodies enough lift to fly. They save energy by using wind and rising warm air currents to give them a boost.

Sit-and-Wait Hunting Saves Energy Too

Red-tails routinely hunt from perches. From a tall tree or pole, the hawks can easily see more than 100 yards. A red-tail could sit on a goal post and watch a mouse scurry under the opposite goal post on the far end of a football field. Their eyes are the size of ours, but we need binoculars to see what a red-tailed hawk can see. Gliding a mile above the ground, they can spot prey two miles away. Red-tails excel at soaring on the warm updrafts, but they are not built for speed.

Hunting from the air is usually done with a slight wind to help them hover over the ground. They actively hunt prey within a hundred feet so they can dive down in seconds to seize their unsuspecting catch before it can scamper off. The hawks' eyes adjust very quickly from seeing long distance to seeing up close as they grab their prey.

Secrets to Success: No Picky Eaters and Adapt to Any Habitat

Rodents are favorite red-tail menu items, but a hungry hawk will settle for almost any meal. They will eat frogs, snakes and even insects when prey is hard to find. Small animals like mice are eaten most often, but animals as big as rabbits can be quarry. Sometimes they catch birds.

Red-tails inhabit the plains to the mountains. They favor open country with scattered trees, but they have been known to nest in cities. Our red-tailed hawks live here throughout the year. That doesn't mean they don't move around a bit. Some red-tails migrate further south when they can't find food easily. Others just shift around trying to find a place with lots of prey. The hawks that migrate are likely to be younger hawks that haven't staked out a good territory.

Flying Feathered Acrobats

The bond between male and female red-tails is life-long. Before spring, pairs that haven't wintered together meet again near their old nest. They sometimes put on a spectacular spiraling display with the male circling a thousand feet into the sky before swooping down toward the female. She and he may clutch talons and tumble through the air. They are slow but beautiful flyers.

Nesting pairs patrol the area around their nest for intruders. They often chase off other hawks, owls and even eagles. They do not want other raptors hunting in their territory. They are most on-guard during the nesting season and more tolerant of wanderers in the winter. Mature hawks secure the best habitats with plenty of space and food.

Nests with a View

High nests are built by both parents on any suitable tree, cliff or manmade structure where the birds have a wide view of their territory. By late winter the hawks break off big sticks to begin nest construction or to repair an old nest. The female uses her wings, beak, feet and body to shape the inner nest bowl made of soft bark and plant material.

Newly hatched babies are completely helpless with bobble heads and weak bodies. The parents must shelter them from cold, rain, snow and too much sun. When they are about 6 weeks old, the young birds make their first clumsy flights to nearby perches and back to the nest. They are not confident flyers for weeks, and they noisily beg for food wherever they have landed.

Camouflage-Colored Feathers Aid Hunting

Young red-tails have dark stripes on their tails and won't get reddish tail feathers before they are two years old. Color can vary quite a lot among mature red-tailed hawks. Most have brown backs, pale undersides speckled with brown and the characteristic russet-red tails.

The tail feathers that give the birds their name are sometimes hard to see. If sunlight is shining through the feathers, the cinnamon-red color shows when the hawks fly overhead.

Despite their name, not all red-tailed hawks even have rusty-red tail feathers. Since many show up with different coloring, it can be tricky to positively ID red-tailed hawks.



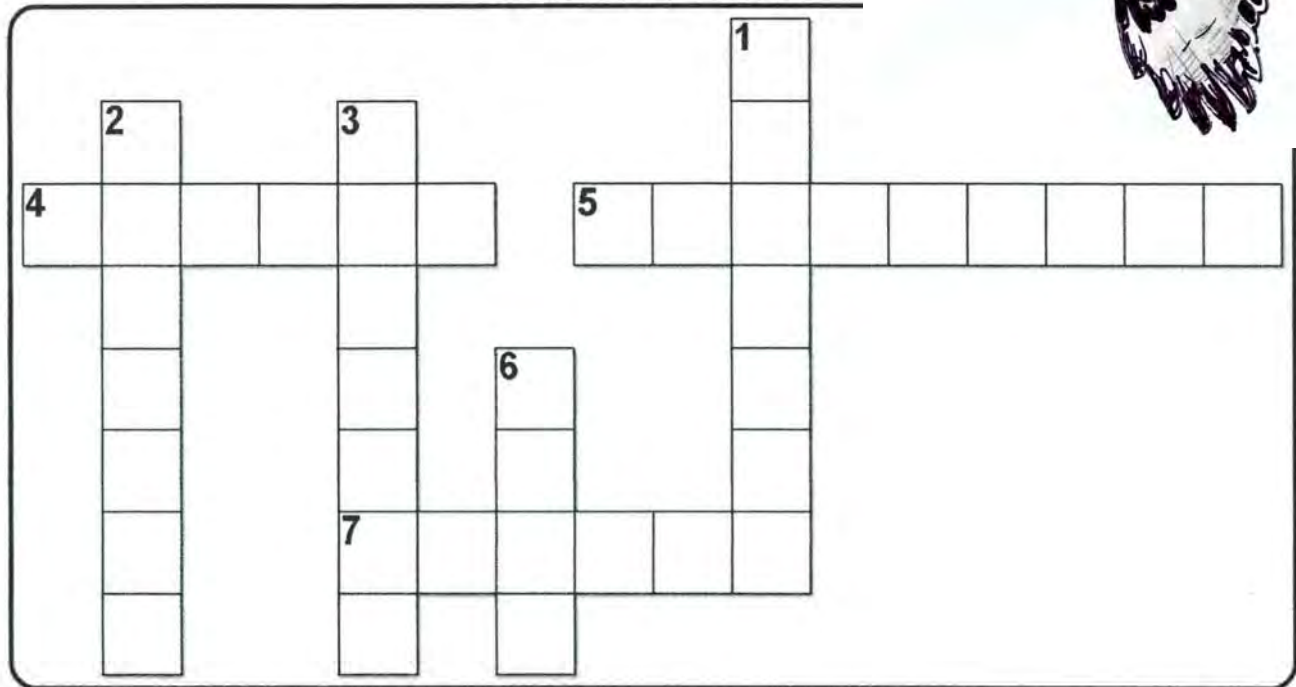
Red-Tail Count, A Car Ride Game

Make it a game to see how many red-tailed hawks you can spot. Look for them sitting on power poles, fence posts or tall trees next to the road. Also watch for them soaring high over open fields. When you see a hawk, chances are very good it is a red-tailed hawk.

Why look for red-tailed hawks in the **winter**? There are more of them around as hawks from mountain habitats or areas far north of us move down to join our year-round residents. Also it is easier to spot big birds perched in tall trees during the season when trees have no leaves blocking our view.



Crossword Puzzle



Across:

- 4 A bird of prey with sharp, curved beak and claws used to catch and eat other animals
 5 A large space red-tails guard to keep out competitors
 7 Sharp, curved claws used to catch and carry prey

Down:

- 1 High places where hawks can stand to look for prey
 2 Where animals find food, shelter, water and space
 3 Red-tailed hawks' favorite foods; includes mice, voles, squirrels, prairie dogs, chipmunks and others
 6 What birds do to replace their worn old feathers with new ones

Possible Answers:
 habitat, molt, perches, raptor, rodents, talons, territory