

Broad-winged Hawks

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Broad-winged Hawks are forest birds. They are the most numerous hawks in the Appalachians. Yet, because these hawks are secretive and shy, people seldom notice them, or they are misidentified as immature Red-shouldered or Red-tailed Hawks.

Broad-winged Hawks, as their name implies, have shorter, broader wings than other Buteo hawks. This wing structure allows better maneuvering and faster speeds in woodlands while chasing prey. However, their wings are also pointed, like falcons, and dark bordered.

Broad-winged hawks display a black moustache-like streaks on their faces and light streaks of feather color over their eyes. The dark feather stripes under their eyes are also Falcon-like.

The bite of the Broad-winged Hawk is powerful. They often finish killing their quarry with a twist of the beak. This is also a practice of Falcons.

At one time, because of the above mentioned features, Broad-winged Hawks were thought to be Forest Falcons, not Buteo hawks. They also typically built their nests deep in untraveled deciduous woodlands.

Tail bands on immature Broad-winged Hawks are indistinct, whereas, adults display striking black and white horizontal bands on their tail feathers. Broad-winged Hawks have smaller feet for their size than other Buteo hawks; however, their foot grip and talon penetration is astounding.

In mid-September, Broad-winged hawks collect in large flocks called kettles and sail high over the mountain forest as they leave on migration. Sometimes these migrating kettles form groups of a hundred or more as they soar with little effort from one thermal uplift to another on their way South.

Within the last five years, adult Broad-winged Hawks were trapped in Garrett County, Maryland and fitted with solar powered satellite transmitters to track their migration journey. Amazingly, these hawks traveled almost non-stop during daylight hours until they reached Columbia, South America. Then, these Broad-winged Hawks stayed in a Columbia jungle for several weeks feeding up for the remainder of their journey. Suddenly they all picked up and traveled to the foothills of Peru.

Ironically, this remote, forested area is 2,500 to 3,000 elevation: the same as Garrett County, Maryland. This is the longest migration of any North American hawks.

Peru at this time of year is the beginning of Spring. Consequently, now many believe that Broad-winged Hawks breed again in South America.

Broad-winged Hawks are stocky birds, about one-third the size of a Red-tailed Hawk, but larger than a pigeon. Their call is a very high-pitched whistle: Pe Hesseeeesee. This call is almost beyond human hearing range. These hawk eat a variety of prey items: chipmunks, mice, pine squirrels, young rabbits, snakes, frogs, beetles, grasshoppers and crickets.

Back in the 1980s the Maryland Environmental Laboratory studied Broad-winged Hawks and Coopers Hawks for seven years. They discovered that Broad-winged Hawks fed their nestlings more birds than the nearby Coopers Hawks who are known as bird catchers. Moreover, Broad-winged Hawks hatch their young later than other Buteo Hawks. Perhaps this allows time for the local, smaller birds to nest and raise their young. Consequently, Broad-winged Hawks build their nest late in May after the leaf out of the forest trees. This is the latest hatching of young of any of the hawk species.

Just recently, satellite transmitters worn by Broad-winged Hawks discovered another amazing fact; in summer, if it becomes hot, like 90°F and sunny or very humid, the adults alternate guarding their nestlings and soaring. Since these hawks soar more easily than any other species of hawks, they lift on thermal updrafts to 10,000 feet and cool off. Then they return to the nest site and their mate soars up and cools off. Broad-winged Hawks seldom nest in the same nest from year to year; but, most times, they return to the same woods and build a new nest.

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