



16 RAPTORS

That Every Montanan
Should (Kinda) Know

*The “good enough” guide to identifying
birds of prey* **BY TOM DICKSON**

Rough-legged hawk
photo by Carol Polich



The word “raptor” comes from the Latin *rapere*, meaning “to seize or plunder.” Raptors are technically birds that kill other animals for food with their powerful talons. These winged carnivores are grouped into several categories: **Hawks** are broad-winged raptors classified either as **buteos**, which have larger, rounded wings and shorter tails, or as **accipiters**, which are smaller and have shorter wings and longer tails. **Falcons** are raptors with long, pointed wings and narrow tails. **Eagles** are the largest raptors.

For years, whenever I’d visit my dad for a few days, we’d take an afternoon drive in the countryside and look for deer, waterfowl, or whatever else we could spot from the road. Invariably, we’d puzzle over the identity of a bird of prey soaring overhead or perched on a fence post. “A person ought to know his raptors,” Dad always said. He meant that any outdoorsperson worth their salt should be able to identify these mostly large, conspicuous birds. As two self-professed nature lovers, we were embarrassed that so often we could not. “Some kind of raptor up there,” we’d conclude before driving on.

A few years ago, I decided to learn to identify Montana’s 16 most common raptors. For help I turned to local experts: Amy Seaman, director of policy and science for Montana Audubon; Bob Martinka, bird photographer and retired Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks chief of staff; Steve Hoffman, at the time the executive director of Montana Audubon; and Kate Davis, director of the Raptors of the Rockies conservation and education center in Florence. I also consulted several bird books, including *Birds of Montana*, by Jeffrey Marks, Paul Hendricks, and Dan Casey; *Montana Bird Distribution* by P.D. Skaar; *The Sibley Guide to Birds*; and *The Crossley ID Guide: Raptors*, as well as the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology’s online “All About Birds” website.

As I spent time with the raptor experts, I learned that even they can’t always agree on what’s flying overhead. Cooper’s hawk or

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

sharp-shinned? Golden eagle or immature baldy? Small peregrine falcon or large merlin? One February morning, I listened as Martinka and Hoffman spent 30 minutes good-naturedly arguing over whether a distant hawk in a tree was a red-tail or an immature rough-legged.

I soon realized that a goal of definitively identifying raptors was unrealistic. Instead I’d aim for “good enough” identification. In other words, based on a handful of factors—time of year, location, wing or head shape, silhouette, flying style, and coloration—I’d make my best guess and be satisfied with that. After some study and practice, I learned that a robin-size raptor hovering over a field is likely a kestrel. A half-dozen large, dark raptors soaring off a cliff in midsummer are probably turkey vultures. A narrow-winged raptor with “broken” wrists soaring over a trout river is usually an osprey.

I still can’t identify many raptors. Too often they appear only as “dot birds”—dark specks in the sky—or airborne blurs as I drive along the highway. But I’ve found that if I pull off the road, use binoculars to watch a raptor for a few minutes, and, especially, get close enough to see it perched, I’m able to at least narrow down the possibilities and make a decent guess.

Just the other day while driving near Lewistown, I spotted a raptor soaring low over a field, teetering from side to side. The slim, narrow wings were a clue it wasn’t one of the broad-winged buteo hawks. It was too large to be a merlin or kestrel. Though it could have been a prairie falcon, the plumage was too dark for that light-colored species. Then it turned away and briefly exposed a white butt at the base of a narrow tail. The sun was partially in my eyes so I couldn’t identify it for certain, but I felt okay taking a “good enough” guess and calling it a northern harrier.

BUTEO HAWKS

Buteo hawks

(Broad, rounded wings and short tails)



RED-TAILED HAWK

This is one of Montana’s most common and easily identified raptors, even without seeing it. The red-tail’s recognizable primal *kee-er* scream is what you hear in movies any time a scene shifts to the great outdoors. In flight, this large, barrel-chested raptor shows a square head and broad wings and tail. The tail is red-orange above and pale red-orange below. Other plumage ranges from light to dark, but the bird usually shows a dark band between a light chest and belly. Red-tails are regularly seen in all seasons. During warmer months they often soar on thermals, making wide circles with occasional stiff, heavy wingbeats.

When: Year-round

Where: Statewide, but more common in western and south-central Montana, near prairies, pastures, forest edges, and open residential areas.

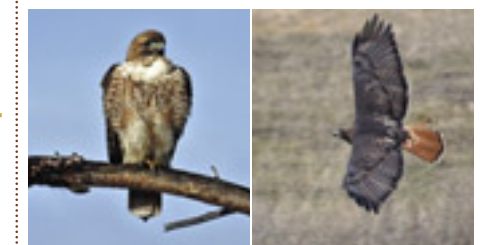
ID tips:

- ▶ Red-orange tail above and below.
- ▶ Square head and long wings, dark leading edge to the wing lining in flight.

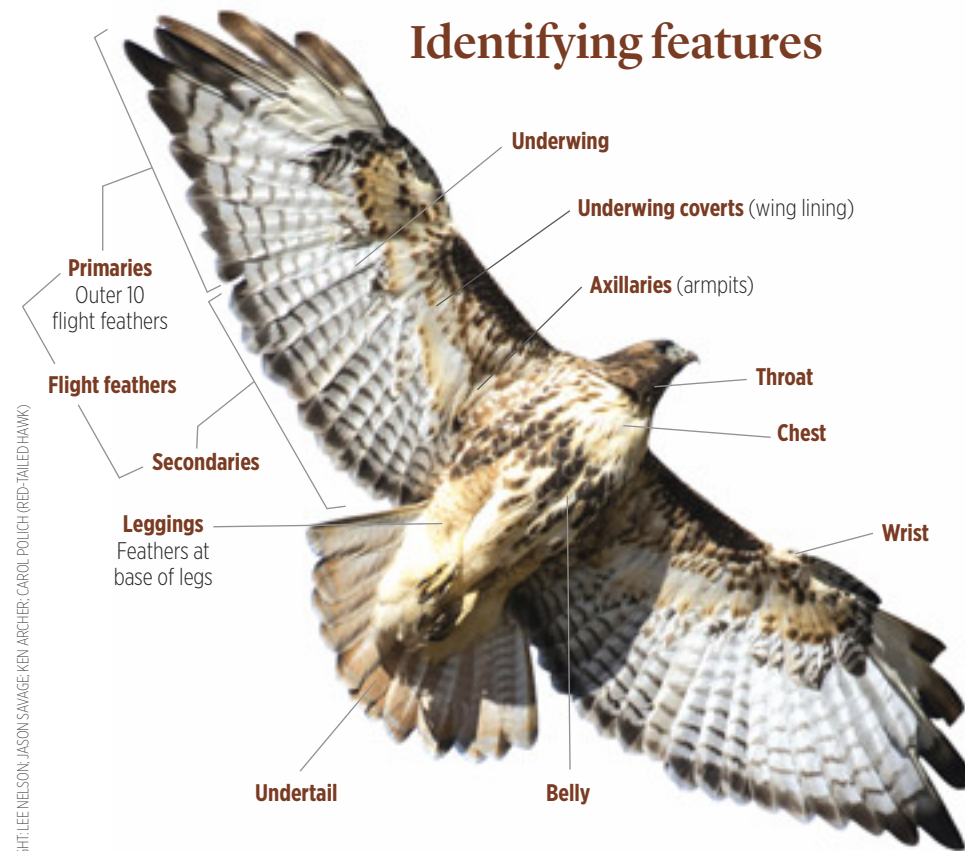
Behavior tip: Often seen perched on utility poles or in large trees, or soaring overhead.

Up-close tip: On a perched bird, look at the back shoulders (scapulars) for the white-speckled V or, on the front, the dark band between the pale chest and belly.

Often mistaken for: Rough-legged hawk in winter.



Identifying features



Note: This guide doesn’t cover immature raptors, which often have markedly different coloration from adults; the dark and light “phases” of some species; and the sometimes stark differences between males and females of some species (“sexual dimorphism”). Also, though owls are raptors, we’re not including those birds here but will cover them in a future guide.

KIMBERLY FRENCH

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: LEE NELSON; JASON SAVAGE; KEN ARCHER; CAROL POLICH (RED-TAILED HAWK)



ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK

If it's winter and you see a large raptor hovering over a field, pasture, or wheat stubble, or perched on a power line, you can bet it's most likely a rough-legged hawk.



Most other raptors have long since headed south from Montana for the winter, but rough-leggeds spend summers in the Arctic and Alaska feeding on lemmings, then migrate south to Montana to hunt meadow voles. If you're not entirely sure it's a rough-legged, look for the square brown "wrist" patch on the pale underside of each wing.

When: Winter.

Where: Statewide, in open grasslands.

ID tips:

- ▶ Large head, long wings, dark belly.
- ▶ Square brown "wrist" patches on pale underside of wings.
- ▶ White rump patch (with small patch of dark feathers near body) and dark tail band.

Behavior tips: Hovers in place over fields like a kestrel. Due to small feet, perches on power lines and small limbs as well as fence posts.

Up-close tip: Small bill and small feet, with legs feathered down to the toes.

Often mistaken for: Red-tailed hawk.



FERRUGINOUS HAWK

You'll spot this big, light-colored raptor during warmer months cruising low over grasslands and sagebrush mainly east of the Continental Divide. Pronounced *ferr-RUE-jin-us*, the ferruginous hawk shows more white than any other buteo, especially when seen from below. The overtail and overwings are rust-colored—hence the "ferr," Latin for iron (rust), in the name.

When: Summer.

Where: Mainly east of the Divide, in grasslands and sagebrush prairie.

ID tips:

- ▶ Large raptor with pointed wings and a large head.
- ▶ Large feet, feathered legs down to the toes.
- ▶ Shows more white than other buteos.
- ▶ Dark legs form a brown V on undersides, easily seen in flight.
- ▶ White undertail, white to rust-red overtail.
- ▶ White underbody and white underwings (showing dark wing "commas") with rust-red overwings.

Behavior tip: Cruises low over grasslands.

Up-close tip: Yellow corners of the mouth extend far back on the head.

Often mistaken for: Prairie falcon, northern harrier.



SWAINSON'S HAWK

This is one of only two raptors in Montana with dark flight feathers (rear) that contrast with the light front wing lining. With all others (except the osprey), it's the other way around. This slim, mid-size raptor cruises low over



grasslands and farmland during warmer months, teetering from side to side like a northern harrier, its pointed wings extended in a shallow V (dihedral). If the bird is perched, look for the dark head and shoulders, and the brown "bib" on the chest.

When: Summer.

Where: Statewide but mostly east of the Divide, in grasslands, farmlands, and sagebrush prairie.

ID tips:

- ▶ Elegant raptor with long, pointed wings and long tail.
- ▶ Dark rear underfeathers and light front underfeathers.

Behavior tip: Cruises low over grasslands with wings held in a shallow V, teetering from side to side.

Up-close tip: Perched birds show a brown "bib" on the upper chest, with a light or barred belly.

Often mistaken for: Prairie falcon, northern harrier, ferruginous hawk, red-tailed hawk.



Accipiter hawks

(Short, broad wings and long tails)



SHARP-SHINNED HAWK

Sharp-shins are Montana's smallest hawk (kestrels, which are a bit smaller, are falcons). These robin-size raptors are found mostly in dense conifer forests. In winter, many move to wooded urban areas to pick off chickadees



and house finches hanging around feeders. If you live in town and see a small raptor zooming after songbirds, there's a good chance it's a sharpie. This raptor is often mistaken for the larger but similarly marked Cooper's hawk, which shares the same habitats. Look at the tail: The sharp-shin's is shorter and squared off (memory tip: The two esses in "sharp-shin" correspond to the two esses in "shorter" and "squared") while the Cooper's is longer and rounded.

When: Year-round.

Where: Statewide except the north-central and northeastern regions, in dense conifer thickets in summer, and in urban areas (especially near bird feeders) in winter.

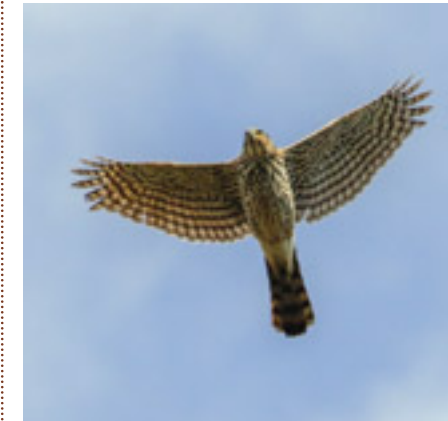
ID tips:

- ▶ Small, robin-size raptor with long, thin legs.
- ▶ Both male and female have dark gray overwings and body and a rufous belly with white barring.
- ▶ Smaller head compared to the Cooper's. In flight silhouette, looks like a capital "T."
- ▶ When flying, rapid wingbeats are almost too fast to count and are interspersed with short glides.

Behavior tips: Often seen in urban areas zipping through trees with quick bursts of speed while pursuing small birds. Mostly seen flying or perched, rarely soaring.

Up-close tip: Long tail with short wings.

Often mistaken for: Cooper's hawk, merlin.



COOPER'S HAWK

Like the smaller sharp-shinned hawk, the Cooper's is a resident of conifer forests and urban areas. One way experts differentiate the two raptor species is by their silhouettes. Because the Cooper's head is larger with respect to its body than the sharp-shin's, the Cooper's silhouette in flight looks more like a lowercase "t." Another way of distinguishing the two is by looking at the tail: The Cooper's is longer and rounded while the sharp-shin's is shorter and squared off.

When: Year-round in western and southern Montana; summer elsewhere.

Where:

Statewide, in conifer forests and wooded urban areas, usually near water.

ID tips:

- ▶ Crow-size raptor with a larger head when compared to the sharp-shin's. In flight silhouette, looks like a lowercase "t."
- ▶ Head is flat on top with an overhanging brow that creates a fierce expression.
- ▶ Slow, countable wingbeats compared to the faster wingbeats of a sharp-shin.
- ▶ Tail shows three bars from above or below with a rounded tip.

Behavior tips: Often seen in urban areas chasing songbirds through trees and brush. Mostly seen flying or perched, rarely soaring.

Up-close tips: Tail often shows a white tip. Eyes can be red, yellow, orange, or gray.

Often mistaken for: Sharp-shinned hawk, merlin, northern goshawk.



NORTHERN GOSHAWK

Consider yourself lucky—and far from civilization—if you spot one of these rarely seen raptors. Northern goshawks mainly live in mature conifer forests, especially in remote wilderness areas. The largest of the accipiters, they hunt along forest openings and edges in search of mountain grouse, ground squirrels, and snowshoe hares. Due to their size, with wingspans of more than three feet, and slow, powerful wingbeats, they can be mistaken for a buteo. Look for the striking bicolors of the slate-gray body, wings, and tail and the white front with fine gray barring when seen up close. If you spot one perched in a tree, look for the red eyes and white "eyebrows."

When: Year-round.

Where: Western and south-central Montana, usually in dense coniferous forests during warmer months; in winter, in more open habitat interspersed with trees.

ID tips:

- ▶ Slate-gray on top and whitish gray below.
- ▶ Pointed, broad wings when flying.
- ▶ Both sexes have dark gray overwings and body, a lightly barred belly, and a gray banded tail.

Behavior tip: Often seen as a dark blur as it races through dense forest pursuing birds.

Up-close tip: Red eyes and prominent white "eyebrows."

Often mistaken for: Cooper's hawk.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JASON SAVAGE; JESSE LEE VARNADO; TRACY SCOTT; DONALD M. JONES; BOB MARTINKA; SHARON DEWART-HANSON; DONALD M. JONES; DUANE HUIE; LEE NELSON

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK; DAN ELLISON; SHUTTERSTOCK; DONALD M. JONES; DONALD M. JONES; FC BEROUJIST

Falcons

(Long, pointed wings and narrow tails)



AMERICAN KESTREL

The American kestrel is Montana's smallest raptor and another that's commonly seen statewide. This robin-size falcon is most often spotted hovering over a field or pasture, wings motionless or flicking in a hover, facing the wind, as it looks for grasshoppers, mice, and meadow voles. Also watch for them on fence posts and utility wires, bobbing their head and tail.



In addition to its small size, the male kestrel stands out with its distinctive bright blue-gray head and wings and red-brown back and tail, tipped in black. The female is less brightly marked, but both sexes have a distinct dark vertical "teardrop" mark below the eye.

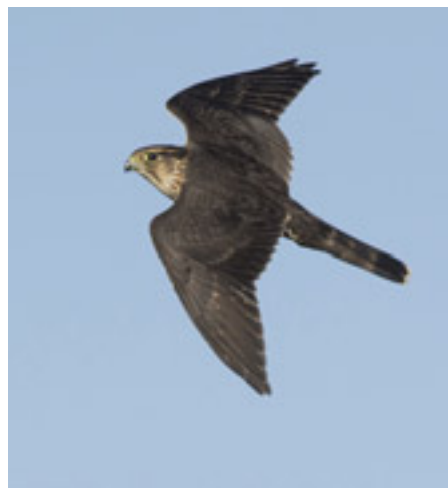
When: Warmer months, though year-round in parts of southwestern Montana.
Where: Statewide, near grasslands, farmlands, and urban areas.
ID tips:

- ▶ Small raptor with long, pointed wings and long tail.
- ▶ Familiar call is a loud *killy-killy-killy*.
- ▶ Male has blue-gray wings on top, pale beneath, and a red-brown tail with black tip.
- ▶ Female has orange wings on top, pale beneath, and a barred, light red-brown tail.

Behavior tip: Often seen hovering, or perched on fence posts, utility wires, and telephone poles, in open rural areas. When flying, rapid wingbeats are almost too fast to count.

Up-close tip: Dark "eye spots" (ocelli) on the back of head may give the illusion that it is looking at you, which may be a way of discouraging other predators from stealing prey or attacking.

Often mistaken for: Merlin.



MERLIN

The merlin is a close cousin of the kestrel and only a tad larger, with dark slate-blue wings. Underneath, the body is light and the wings have a checkered appearance. Merlins are distinguished by their rocket-like flight through conifer forests and wooded residential areas.

When: Year-round, though less common west of the Divide in winter.

Where: Statewide, in forests and also, in winter, wooded urban areas, where they prey on waxwings in mountain ash.



ID tips:

- ▶ Small raptor, though a bit larger and chunkier than a kestrel.
- ▶ Stiff, shallow wingbeats.
- ▶ Resembles a small peregrine falcon without the dark "sideburns."

Behavior tip: Flies like a rocket after smaller birds, often flying among buildings and even vehicles in traffic to ambush prey.

Often mistaken for: Kestrel, peregrine falcon.



PEREGRINE FALCON

The peregrine falcon is famous as the fastest-flying animal on earth, diving after prey at up to 200 miles an hour. But you are more likely to spot one perched on a cliff near a large river in western or south-central Montana. When it's perched, look for the peregrine falcon's dark "helmet" head and dark "sideburns"; a light, barred belly; and long, slate-gray wings. In flight it has a short, narrow tail and long, pointed wings.

When: March until October.

Where: Western and south-central Montana, in open areas near rivers and lakes with prominent snags, cliffs, and crags used for perching.

ID tips:

- ▶ Large, bulky body with long, pointed wings.
- ▶ Both male and female are dark slate-blue above with light underparts, and narrow, even barring across a light belly.
- ▶ Uniformly patterned underwings.

Behavior tip: Quick, shallow wingbeats. Often stands on high perches watching for prey, which range in size from swallows to ducks.

Up-close tip: Dark "helmet" with dark "sideburns." When perched, long wings extend close to the end of the tail.

Often mistaken for: Prairie falcon.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: DANIELLUSON; SHUTTERSTOCK; DANNY J. BROWN; KEN ARCHER; BOB MARTINKA; DONALD M. JONES; BOB MARTINKA; THERESA JOHNSON



PRAIRIE FALCON

The prairie falcon is a brown-marked raptor of open grasslands and sagebrush prairie, but unlike the peregrine it is rarely found near water. It has the same body size and wing shape as the peregrine, but is pale brown above and lighter underneath, with distinctive dark "armpits" visible when flying. You see this falcon cruising low over arid prairie and rangeland in central and eastern Montana.



When: Year-round.

Where: Statewide, though mostly east of the Divide, in open grasslands, river breaks, and sagebrush prairie.

ID tips:

- ▶ Large, bulky body with long, pointed wings with stiff wingbeats.
- ▶ Sandy brown body and wings above, light below, with a light belly and dark "armpits."
- ▶ Uniformly patterned underwings.

Behavior tip: Cruises low over grasslands.

Up-close tip: White "eyebrow" and pale brown "moustache" and "helmet."

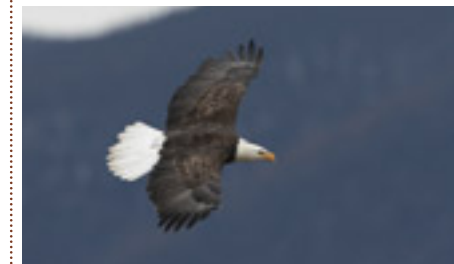
Often mistaken for: Kestrel, peregrine falcon, northern harrier.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: DICK WALKER; JOHN ROLOFF; LEE NELSON; DUANE HUIE; DAN ELLISON; BOB MARTINKA; SHARON DEWARTH-HANSEN; DUANE HUIE

Eagles

(The largest raptors)



BALD EAGLE

Due to their bright white head and tail, adult bald eagles of both sexes are the easiest of all raptors to identify. These massive birds of prey, with nearly seven-foot wingspans, are found mainly around water, where they feed on fish they catch, find dead, or steal from ospreys. In winter, when they scavenge road-killed deer, they can be seen along highways. From a distance, flying bald eagles can be mistaken for turkey vultures. But unlike vultures, bald eagles soar with outstretched wings held nearly straight, like a flying plank.

Immature bald eagles, which lack the white head and tail, are often mistaken for golden eagles. To identify an immature baldy, look for bits of white in the body and white "armpits." Golden eagles have almost no white in the body and none in the armpits.

When: Year-round.

Where: Western and south-central Montana, in summer near rivers, lakes, and reservoirs; in winter their range widens to feed on gut piles, roadkill, and cattle and elk calving afterbirth.

ID tips:

- ▶ Massive raptor with long wings, broad tail, big head, and big yellow beak.
- ▶ When soaring, outstretched wings are flat, like a plank. Wingbeats are slow and heavy.
- ▶ Adults have a distinctive white head and tail; black-brown belly, back, and wings.
- ▶ Massive nests as large as a VW Beetle, usually in cottonwoods
- ▶ Juveniles show some white on the body and "armpits," growing into a white head, white tail, and yellow beak by age four or five.

Behavior tip: Often seen soaring near open water.

Often mistaken for: Turkey vulture (from a distance). Immature bald eagles are often mistaken for golden eagles.



Immature bald eagle



GOLDEN EAGLE

Like bald eagles, golden eagles are massive raptors with nearly seven-foot wing spans. Though the habitats of both eagle species overlap, goldens are mostly seen in grassland foothills and sagebrush prairie, often near rocky cliffs, rather than near big rivers and reservoirs. In winter, goldens often feed on road-killed deer and can be seen along highways next to bald eagles.

Adult goldens have uniform brown plumage with some gold feathers on the back of the head and neck. They are sometimes mistaken for immature bald eagles, which lack that species' distinctive white head. A golden has an almost entirely dark brown body and wings and shows almost no white.

When: Year-round.

Where: Statewide, mostly in mountains in summer, and in winter, in grasslands and sagebrush prairie or along highways feeding on roadkill.

ID tips:

- ▶ Massive raptor with long wings and broad tail but small head. Wingbeats are slow and heavy.
- ▶ Adults are almost entirely dark brown with a golden back of head, showing almost no white.

Behavior tip: When soaring, outstretched wings are held in a slight dihedral (shallow V), like a turkey vulture's and unlike the bald eagle's flat "plank" wingspan.

Up-close tip: Look for golden feathers on the back of the head, feathered lower legs, and yellow feet.

Often mistaken for: Turkey vulture (from a distance) and immature bald eagle.



Immature bald eagle

Others



NORTHERN HARRIER

This is another easy-to-identify raptor due to its habit of soaring low, wobbling from side to side, over fields, wetlands, and meadows. The harrier has long, narrow wings extending



in a shallow V (dihedral) and shows a distinctive white “butt” patch. In addition to the white rump, you can differentiate a harrier from a falcon by its small, owl-like head and long tail.

When: Year-round.

Where: Statewide, in grasslands and marshes.

ID tips:

- ▶ Slim body; long, narrow tail; long, narrow wings stretched out in shallow V.
- ▶ White rump patch.
- ▶ Females and young are overall brown; males are gray with white underneath and black wing tips and wing edge.
- ▶ Small, round head.

Behavior tips: Soars low over meadows and marshes, teetering from side to side, with only occasional wingbeats. Rarely perches in trees but will perch on bare ground or fence posts.

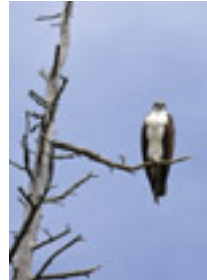
Up-close tip: Owl-like face with a facial disc, small slender bill, and yellow eyes.

Often mistaken for: Rough-legged hawk (due to the white rump patch), prairie falcon.



OSPREY

If you're near a lake, reservoir, or large river in western or central Montana and see a light-colored raptor overhead with long, narrow wings that seem broken at the “wrist,” it's an osprey. From below, these fish-eating raptors



usually show a creamy body and front wing linings and dark brown “wrists” and rear flight feathers. On top, the body and wings are dark brown except for the white head crown.

When: Summer, arriving in early April.

Where: Mostly western and central Montana, near rivers, lakes, reservoirs, or other waters containing fish, even in towns and cities.

ID tips:

- ▶ Dark brown on top with white head and dark eyeline, and cream underneath with dark brown flight feathers and “wrists.”
- ▶ Extremely long wings appear broken at the “wrists,” creating an M-shaped silhouette.
- ▶ Builds large stick nests on manmade platforms, utility poles, and large dead trees within a half mile of water.

Behavior tip: Hovers over water then dives, hitting the water feet first to grab a fish swimming near the surface.

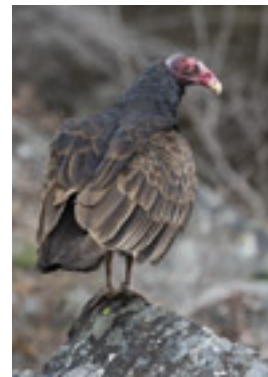
Up-close tip: White head has a dark eyestripe extending to the back of the head.

Often mistaken for: Bald eagle.



TURKEY VULTURE

Though turkey vultures don't hunt live prey, they are still considered raptors and have DNA similar to hawks and eagles. Turkey vultures are large birds, seen in the distance soaring off bluffs, their wings teetering un-



steadily and rarely flapping. They have long wings held out in a shallow V (dihedral) and a tiny head, looking from a distance almost headless. From below, the wings show a two-tone effect, with a distinct dark

body and wing coverts (front feathers) contrasting with light flight (rear) feathers.

When: Summer.

Where: Statewide, near roadsides, farm fields, grasslands, and along river and mountain bluffs.

ID tips:

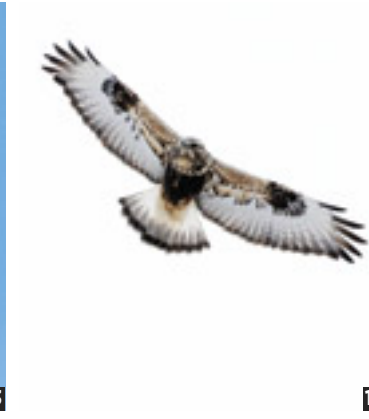
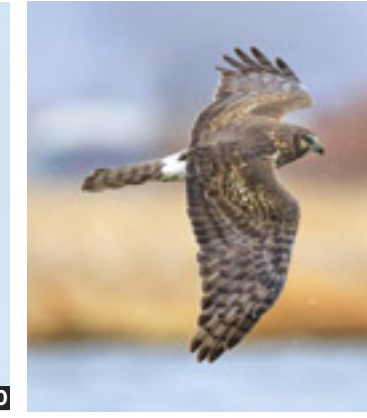
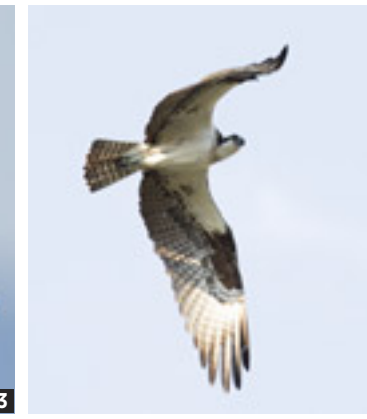
- ▶ A large bird with long wings and a tiny head.
- ▶ Wings extend out in a shallow V (dihedral); unsteady, teetering flight.
- ▶ Dark body and front feathers contrasts with light flight feathers, creating a two-tone effect.

Behavior tips: Rarely flaps wings. Mainly seen soaring high overhead, often in “kettles” of three to ten or more, or on the ground feeding on dead deer or other carrion.

Up-close tip: Head is red and featherless; beak is bright white.

Often mistaken for: Golden eagle, bald eagle.

▶ Take a “good enough” guess and try to identify these raptors:



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: JEANETTE TASEY; KEN ARCHER; DONALD M. JONES; DONALD M. JONES; NORA BAZUIN; JASON SAVAGE; SHARON DEWARTHANSEN; PHIL FARNIES; DONALD M. JONES; 2: RICK CLARK; 3: JOHN ROLOFF; 4: DICK WALKER; 5: CAROL POLICH; 6: DONALD M. JONES; 7: SHUTTERSTOCK; 8: FC BERGGUJST; 9: DONALD M. JONES; 10: SHARON DEWARTHANSEN; 11: DICK WALKER; 12: DONALD M. JONES; 13: LEE NELSON; 14: DICK WALKER; 15: KEN ARCHER; 16: CAROL POLICH

Answers: 1. Golden eagle; 2. Cooper's hawk; 3. merlin; 4. osprey; 5. Swainson's hawk; 6. Cooper's hawk; 7. Peregrine falcon; 8. Ferruginous hawk; 9. Bald eagle; 10. Northern goshawk; 11. Northern harrier; 12. Sharp-shinned hawk; 13. Prairie falcon; 14. Turkey vulture; 15. American kestrel; 16. Red-tailed hawk