

Rough-legged Hawk

Buteo lagopus

By Jim Pashby

When our kids were young and we'd drive across central Montana to visit their grandparents at Thanksgiving and Christmas, we'd inevitably see raptors in the sky.

"Rough-legged hawk," I'd always say, even when the raptor was just a tiny speck in the sky.

"Dad, how can you see what bird it is when it's so far away?" they would ask.

"Kids, your father has eagle eyes," my wife would explain.

It wasn't until years later that they learned that their father was just playing the odds: Almost every raptor you see in eastern and central Montana during the winter is a rough-legged hawk.

IDENTIFICATION

Rough-legged hawks are large raptors with a big head, long wings, dark tail band, and a dark belly. The easiest way to identify them is by the square brown "wrist" patch on the

pale underside of each wing. Rough-leggeds also have a white rump patch, visible when the bird is flying low, that looks a bit like the rump patch on a northern harrier.

When perched, rough-leggeds are sometimes mistaken for red-tailed hawks because both have a broad brown chest band between a light upper chest and belly. But if you can get closer to a perched bird, you'll see that a rough-legged has a small beak and small feet, with legs feathered down to the toes.

The reason rough-leggeds are so prevalent in winter is that most other grassland raptors—including ferruginous and Swainson's hawks—migrate south from Montana during the cold months.

RANGE AND HABITAT

Rough-legged hawks spend summers in the Arctic and Alaska, where they feed almost entirely on lemmings. In winter they head south to southern Canada and most of the contiguous United States, including Montana. They arrive in mid-October and are mostly gone by late April.

Rough-legged hawks stick to open country. In the Arctic tundra, they nest on cliffs next to open areas. In Montana they are almost always seen flying over or perched near grasslands, shrublands, and pastures.

BEHAVIOR

In winter, rough-legged hawks feed mostly on meadow voles. Because they frequent open areas with few perches, they often hover over fields, looking like an oversize kestrel. When they do perch, it's almost always on a power line or small tree limb because their feet are so small.

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SCIENTIFIC NAME *Buteo* is Latin for "buzzard," a common European raptor, and *lagopus* is derived from the Greek *lagos*, meaning "hare," and *pous*, meaning "foot." The name is odd because rough-legged hawks have distinctively small feet that could never grasp, much less kill, an adult hare or rabbit.

Their feet (and beak) are small because they feed on small mammals and don't need the big talons and beaks of raptors that prey on jackrabbits, cottontails, and other similar-size mammals.

CONSERVATION

Numbers of this species vary considerably from year to year based on lemming and vole populations, which also vary widely. The species doesn't appear to be in trouble anywhere within its range, though in some places, including Montana, rough-leggeds are occasionally and illegally shot for "sport," according to Buteo Books' *Birds of Montana*. One biologist who surveyed the Mission Valley for two winters in the late 1990s found 42 rough-legged hawks that had been shot. 🦅

