



# Red-Tails

## and Other Raptors

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**Y**ou may see them in woodlands and clearcuts, on power lines and fence posts, and even in city parks and urban areas. But do you know them? Commonly referred to as raptors or hawks, they are diurnal birds of prey. Called “birds of prey” because they exclusively feed on other animals, they are “diurnal” because they feed during the daytime. Out of the 286 species of raptors, several either reside in or migrate through Alabama at some point during the year. Many of these birds can be readily identified by having a general knowledge of size and color characteristics including tail coloration and shape.

One of the most common raptors is the red-tailed hawk. It has a large wingspan of about 50 inches and an unmistakable red tail. These hawks are so common that many people believe that every hawk they see is a red-tailed hawk. The red-shouldered hawk or the broad-winged hawk

could easily be mistaken for a red-tailed, unless some basic markings are observed. The red-shouldered, as the name suggests, has a large red spot on the upper reaches of its shoulder. The tail of the red-shouldered is also different, with two large horizontal black bands and two thin horizontal white bands. The broad-winged hawk has more evenly-sized black and white tail bands. Without knowing the distinct characteristics, these three birds could easily be mistaken for one another.

Another common hawk found in Alabama is the Cooper’s hawk, named after 19th century ornithologist William Cooper. It is sometimes confused with the sharp-shinned hawk, and these two are virtually indistinguishable in appearance. The Cooper’s hawk is usually slightly larger than the sharp-shinned, and generally, the Cooper’s tail is rounded and the sharp-shinned is square-tipped. There may be a slightly noticeable notch in the folded

tail of a sharp-shinned. Using the tail shape to distinguish between the two species works best when the tail is folded.

Two other similar birds mistaken for each other are the American kestrel (sparrow hawk) and the merlin (pigeon hawk). The kestrel is the smallest falcon in North America, weighing around 4 ounces. It is slightly larger than a robin. Merlins are larger, but can look very similar in color and tail patterns with a couple of exceptions. Merlin males have grey tails and backs. Kestrels have two black malars, which are black stripes that run vertically below the eye and behind the cheek. This sets the kestrel apart from any other similar-sized diurnal birds of prey.

Alabama is blessed with many species of raptors. The next time you see one, take a closer look. With a general understanding of some specific characteristics, distinguishing between diurnal birds of prey can become like second nature. ☪

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**Cooper's Hawk**  
(*Accipiter Cooperii*)

**Red-shouldered Hawk**  
(*Buteo Lineatus*)



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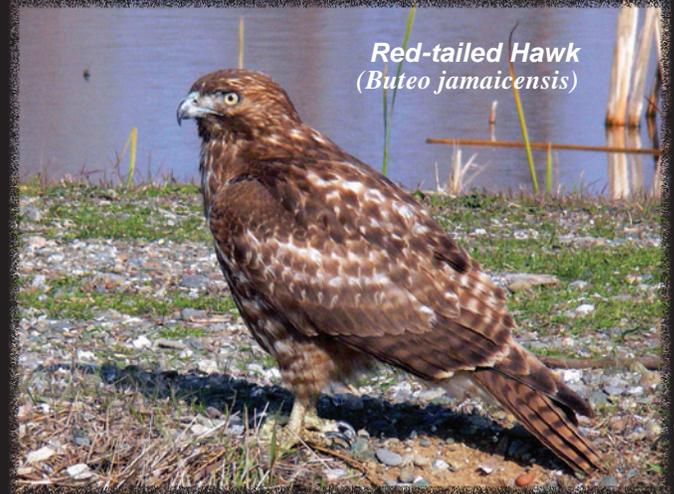
**Merlin**  
(*Falco columbarius*)

**Sharp-shinned Hawk**  
(*Accipiter striatus*)



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**Red-tailed Hawk**  
(*Buteo jamaicensis*)



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**American Kestrel**  
(*Falco sparverius*)



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