

Common Birds of Prey of Alabama

► A bird of prey is any bird that hunts other animals and they are often called raptors. Learn the different types of raptors found in Alabama, their identifying characteristics and typical habitats. Beautiful photographs accompany the descriptions of 15 birds of prey, including eagles, ospreys, hawks, kites, and four kinds of owls.

A bird of prey, as their name indicates, is any species of bird that hunts other animals such as small mammals, fish, and other birds for food. Birds of prey are commonly referred to as raptors and possess powerful, sharp talons and hooked bills for capturing and eating prey, which distinguish them from other types of birds. Raptors are generally larger than common songbirds, but there are a few exceptions. Many raptors also display a type of camouflage known as counter-shading that can best be described as being darkly colored when viewed from above (the backside of the bird) and lightly colored when viewed from below (the underside, or belly of the bird).

In general, raptors can be divided into two groups: those that are active during the day (e.g., hawks, falcons) and those that are active at night (owls). Two taxonomic families of raptors commonly occur in Alabama: Falconidae, which includes falcons and kestrels, and Accipitridae, which includes all hawks, kites, eagles, and osprey. These raptors hunt during the day (diurnal) and rely mainly on their sense of sight. They typically glide high above foraging grounds where they can spot prey or can be found perched high atop a tree or along telephone wires searching for prey below.

Only two taxonomic families of owls are common in Alabama: the Tytonidae (barn owl) and Strigidae (all other owls). These owls can easily be distinguished from other raptors by their front facing eyes and wide circular faces, which are used to help them locate prey. Hunting primarily at night (nocturnal), owls use their excellent sense of hearing and sight to locate prey while perched or flying above foraging grounds.

Although most of the species described below are present all year in Alabama, most raptors are migratory to a certain extent. For example, year-round residents within the state include Cooper's hawk, red-shouldered hawk, red-tailed hawk, American kestrel, and osprey. All of the owls in Alabama are resident birds and are found throughout the state year round. Raptors found



Bald eagle (top), barn owl (left) and northern harrier (right)

in Alabama only during the summer include swallow-tailed kite, Mississippi kite, and broad-winged hawk. The sharp-shinned hawk, northern harrier, and most bald eagles are winter residents throughout the state.

As previously noted, all raptors hunt other animals for food, but food preference varies considerably among species. Most raptors in Alabama are generalists, meaning they will eat almost anything smaller than

themselves if they can catch it. Common prey include small mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. Though they are generalists, bald eagles feed mainly on fish and larger prey, such as rabbits, skunks, and other medium-sized mammals. Similarly, the largest owl species in Alabama, the great horned owl, also feeds on medium-sized mammals. Other smaller owls feed mostly on small mammals, such as mice. The most specialized feeder found in the state is the osprey, which feed almost exclusively on fish. Though several raptor species hunt smaller birds, studies indicate they do not limit or regulate gamebird populations, such as quail or turkey.

Because of a perceived threat to gamebird populations, and at times, a real threat to poultry (especially small-scale free-range chickens), raptors were persecuted for centuries. Practices such as state-implemented bounties and both public and private poisoning programs were carried out in the name of game and poultry protection. In reality, these practices resulted in decreased populations of raptors without significant increases in gamebird populations. Furthermore, the widespread use of persistent pesticides such as DDT decreased populations to the point that many raptors were so rare that federal protection became necessary. In 1972, an amendment to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act extended the same protection given to migratory waterfowl and songbirds to birds of prey (raptors). Coupled with the banning of DDT and other harmful pesticides, this amendment resulted in population rebounds of most raptors. Exceptions include the swallow-tailed kite, northern harrier, and American kestrel, all of which have low population numbers and are listed as species of concern in Alabama.

Tips for Identifying Raptors

Identification of raptors in the wild can be difficult at times, especially when they are in flight. A good pair of 8 to 10× binoculars is helpful for identifying raptors at a distance. Plumage (feathers) color and patterns often differ markedly between males and females of some raptors. Plumage also will differ between immature and adult raptors. What may look like an adult female of one species may, on closer inspection, be an immature male of another species.

In addition to plumage, several other distinguishing features may be used to identify raptors, such as the relative size of the bird and the shape of the tail and wings. Flight characteristics, such as soaring, frequent swooping, and wing beat, is also used for identification. The habitat in which the bird is found along with the time of year can provide additional clues.

Bald Eagle

Given its status as the national symbol, the bald eagle is one of the most easily identifiable raptors in the United States. At an average weight of 9.5 pounds, bald eagles are one of the largest birds encountered east of the Mississippi River. Identifying features of adult birds include the characteristic white head and tail feathers contrasting with a dark brown body and wings with a yellow beak and feet. Feeding mainly on fish, waterfowl, and mammals, bald eagles are often found close to water.



Bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)



Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)



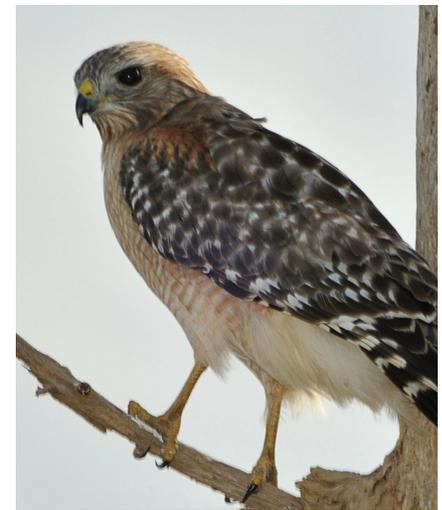
Swallow-tailed kite (*Elanoides forficatus*)



Mississippi kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*)



Red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)



Red-shouldered hawk (*Buteo lineatus*)

Osprey

Feeding exclusively on fish, ospreys are usually found along coasts, lakes, and other large bodies of open water. At an average weight of 3.5 pounds, the osprey is a relatively large raptor. Adult ospreys have a dark brown back and wings with a white crown, forehead, and throat along with a characteristic dark eye-line running from the beak to the nape of the neck. Ospreys were one of the species hardest hit by the use of DDT, experiencing sharp population declines during the 1950s through the 1970s. However, their numbers have recovered in most areas since the use of DDT was discontinued.

Swallow-Tailed Kite

The swallow-tailed kite is listed as a species of high conservation concern in Alabama and is uncommon across its range in North America. These birds are

found in the United States only during the summer and spend the winter in Central and South America. They can be distinguished from raptors of similar size by the distinctive forked tail for which it is named. The swallow-tailed kites have white underwings, head, and body with sharply contrasting black wings, tail, and back. These birds prefer riparian and swamp forests with tall trees used for nesting and are most frequently seen foraging along the edges of these habitats.

Mississippi Kite

With a North American range limited to the southeastern and central United States, the Mississippi kite is a fairly uncommon raptor. As with the swallow-tailed kite, they are also present in the United States only during the summer breeding season. Identifying features include

a light gray head, darker gray wings and body, and a long blackish tail. Mississippi kites are slightly smaller than the swallow-tailed kite and can be distinguished by their shorter, squared tails. Mississippi kites are most frequently seen in and around sparse woodlands and adjacent open areas.

Red-Tailed Hawk

Almost anyone who has ever taken a long car ride has probably seen a red-tailed hawk. This species, which is frequently seen perched along telephone lines or in trees, is one of the most common raptors in the United States. Though there are several subspecies, all of them can be identified by the reddish orange tail for which the species is named. Other identifying features include a pale breast and underwings with brown belly bands and primary tips, and a brown head, back, and wings. At an average weight of almost 3 pounds, red-tailed hawks are one of the largest hawk species east of the Mississippi River. Feeding primarily on small mammals, red-tailed hawks are found in tall trees near agricultural fields and other openings where prey is abundant.

Red-Shouldered Hawk

Typically about half the size of the red-tailed hawk, the red-shouldered hawk is most often found in floodplain forests. Features distinguishing the red-shouldered hawk from other species in the genus *Buteo* include their reddish shoulder patches and barred undersides and a pale crescent near the wing tips that is visible in flight. Their dark tails have narrow white bands and are longer than the tails of other, similar species.

Broad-Winged Hawk

With similar habitat preferences to the red-shouldered hawk, the broad-winged hawk can sometimes be difficult to distinguish, but several characteristics set it apart. First, broad-winged hawks are only present in the United States during the summer, while red-shouldered hawks are present year round. Another distinguishing feature is the dark borders on the trailing side of the broad-winged hawks' wings. Their tails are also shorter than that of the red-shouldered hawk, and the tail typically has only one broad white band as opposed to the several thin white bands on red-shouldered hawks' tails.

Cooper's Hawk

Found year round throughout Alabama, Cooper's hawks are similar to sharp-shinned hawks. Averaging around one pound, Cooper's hawks are larger than sharp-shinned hawks. Almost identical in coloration, Cooper's hawks can be distinguished from sharp-shinned hawks by their longer, rounder tails, larger heads and straighter wings. As with sharp-shinned hawks, Cooper's hawks eat mostly smaller songbirds and are found in and around forests.

Sharp-Shinned Hawk

Averaging less than 7 ounces, the sharp-shinned hawk is one of Alabama's smallest raptors. Most of Alabama falls only within its winter range, but they are found year round in some northern counties. Sharp-shinned hawks are mostly gray birds with darkly banded tails and reddish barred breasts. Very few characteristics



Broad-winged hawk (*Buteo platypterus*)



Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*)



Sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*)



Northern harrier (*Circus cyaneus*)

distinguish this species from the closely related Cooper's hawk. Distinguishing features include a shorter, more squared tail than that of the Cooper's hawk as well as a smaller head and thinner legs. Feeding primarily on smaller songbirds, sharp-shinned hawks prefer mixed forests and pine forests.

Northern Harrier

Though most raptors hunt from high above, the northern harrier is frequently seen hunting just a few feet above the ground in marshes and grasslands. Commonly referred to as the marsh hawk or sparrow Hawk, females of the species are mostly dark brown above with a pale underside barred with dark brown. Males on the other hand, are mostly pale gray above and white below. The characteristic that most easily distinguishes them from other gray raptors are the black wingtips visible from both below and above during flight and a white rump patch.



American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*)



Barn owl (*Tyto alba*)

American Kestrel

Though found year round throughout most of the contiguous United States, the American kestrel is listed as a species of high conservation concern in Alabama. With rufous-colored tails and backs, slate blue wings and caps, and pale undersides, American kestrels are the most colorful raptor in the United States. Apart from their distinctive coloration, these birds also display several characteristic dark barring patterns including two dark bars descending from the eyes, barred backs, and a dark band at the bottom of the tail. Another identifying characteristic is a habit of repeated tail bobbing when perched. American kestrels utilize a broad range of habitats from deserts and grasslands to sparsely wooded (i.e., open) forests.



Barred owl (*Strix varia*)



Great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*)



Eastern screech-owl (*Otus asio*)

Barn Owl

Most commonly associated with barns and other structures built by humans, barn owls hunt for small mammals over agricultural fields, marshes, and other grassy habitats. Because of their large, white heart-shaped faces, barn owls are easily distinguished from other owl species. Many owls have special feather adaptations that minimize the sound made when flapping their wings or gliding through the air. Other key features include their fairly long legs and mottled gray and pale brown wings and backs.

Barred Owl

Found primarily in large forests, barred owls are easily identified by the brown streaks visible on their bellies and their lack of ear tufts. These birds also have dark eyes, which distinguish them from most other eastern owls, which have yellow eyes.

Great Horned Owl

The great horned owl is the largest and probably most common owl species in Alabama. Though most easily identified by their large size and widely spaced ear tufts, great horned owls are mostly gray above and barred beneath with rusty-orange feathers around their eyes. Common habitats include agricultural fields, forests, and forest edges, but these birds can be found in almost any habitat harboring enough prey to support them.

Eastern Screech-Owl

Eastern screech-owls are the smallest owl commonly seen in the eastern United States. Though they vary in color from gray to brown to red, screech-owls can be identified by their small size, ear tufts, and the elaborate patterns that cover their bodies. These birds can be found in most forested habitats in Alabama, particularly open woods or along forest edges.



Deforest R. Allgood, Graduate Research Assistant, and Mark D. Smith, *Extension Specialist* and Assistant Professor, School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, Auburn University

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Revised September 2020, ANR-1386
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