



Wildlife Spotting: Better Buteo Recognition

Top left: Red-tailed hawk, Tso Dho Nimh (SXC Images)

Top right: Swainson's hawk, D. Ditchburn

A hawk on a fencepost or soaring above a field is a common sight along the highway, and you can be fairly certain that it is one of two species: Red-tailed (*Buteo jamaicensis*) or Swainson's (*Buteo swainsoni*). There are other possibilities, but they are much less likely. The Ferruginous hawk (*Buteo Regalis*) is rarer and tends to be further southeast, and the Rough-legged hawk (*Buteo lagopus*) only migrates through in March and October.

To make things difficult, both of our most populous hawks are similar in size (about 22 inches long, with a wingspan of about 50 inches). Also, both have a number of different colour variations, or "phases", which adds to the challenge. But here are some general points to consider in making an identification...

The Red-tailed hawk, as its name suggests, has a reddish upper tail. It is lighter when seen from below, with a discrete white band on the base. The Swainson's tail is creamy with fine dark barring. The Red-tailed hawk frequently has a belly band of darker streaks around its middle, while the Swainson's commonly has a dark bib on its chin and upper chest. If you are watching them soaring above you, look at the leading edge of the wing – the Red-tailed hawk generally has a more evident dark bar here. Also, the Swainson's wings are a bit more pointed, and it tends to hold them in a slightly more upwardly tilted posture in flight. Subtle differences – but lots of repeated observation and checking key identifying points helps you get familiar with the big birds.

These hawks may share a summer habitat, but they head to different destinations for the winter. Red-tailed hawks only fly down to the U.S. for the cold months. Swainson's hawks make a truly marathon migration all the way to the southern part of South America. Sadly, their numbers have been badly impacted by insecticides on their wintering grounds.



Hawks in flight:
Red-tailed on left and
Swainson's on right