

ID Insert: Tips on Identifying Soaring Hawks in Our Region*

Melissa Hill

When you sit down and really think about it, the Great Plains region of the United States is definitely not an ideal birding area. Sure, we have lots of open space and we get large numbers of birds but the variety of species is not something to go bragging about to your friends “back East.” But . . . there is a silver lining! Having fewer species to identify means there are fewer birds to sort out when you’re trying to identify the one you just saw. That being said, it can still be tricky.

In theory, hawks in this area should be relatively easy to identify. There are only four “soaring” hawks (genus *Buteo*) that generally occur here: **Swainson’s**, **Red-tailed**, **Ferruginous** and **Rough-legged (“Roughies”)**. Two of the four species are very seasonal—Swainson’s hawks are only found here in the summer, Roughies” only in the winter—so at least you know you can rule out one of the species most of the time. Ferruginous and Red-tailed hawks occur in our area year round.

Remember when I said “in theory” they should be really easy to tell apart? Yes, but there are some tricky sides to them as well. They are all roughly the same size. While the Ferruginous is the largest hawk species in North America, on average it is only a few inches taller than the Swainson’s hawk – the smallest of our soaring hawks. That means when they’re sitting up on a power pole, 100 yards away, they all still look the same size. Each of these species can have a wide variation in their coloring—ranging from very pale to very dark. When they are perched, it all gets even trickier! With the exception of the adult Red-tailed hawk, there is rarely anything visibly noticeable when the birds’ backs are to you—those darn wings cover so much up! Even their calls are similar! Although not highly vocal birds the majority of the time, they do all have similar screams—even though the Red-tailed hawk is famous for its scream, which is usually attached to video of a Bald Eagle.

So, how do you tell which hawk you are looking at? Each of these hawks has distinctive markings on the underside of their bodies that help you tell them apart. Personally, I like to start by looking at the top of the bird and working my way down to try and find distinguishing features. Here are the features that help define the species for me. Please remember this is my method and it doesn’t always work, but hopefully it will be a good starting point.

HEAD: In general, **Swainson’s** and **Red-tails** have dark heads; **Ferruginous** and **Roughies** have “lighter” colored heads. **Ferruginous** have a very large, bright yellow “gape” to their mouth which often gives them away, even from a distance.

NECK, CHEST, & BELLY: **Swainson’s** and **Red-tails** can often be hard to tell apart here.



Swainson’s have “bibs” of dark feathers that extend down their neckline and turn lighter, continuing to their legs.

Melissa Hill photograph



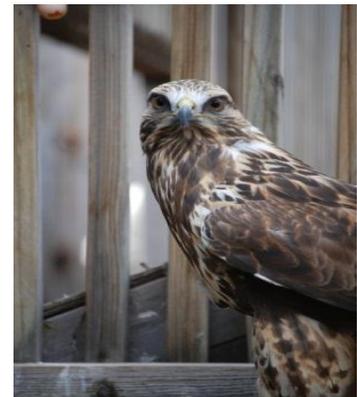
The dark neck feathers on the **Red-tail** end around a “necklace” line where lighter feathers take over. Red-tails also typically have a “belly band,” a line of dark feathers where you’d expect to see a belt.

Melissa Hill photograph



Ferruginous typically have all light necks and chests that lead down to their abdomen.

Melissa Hill photograph



Rough-legs, in general, have lighter coloring down to their lower belly, where they suddenly have a wide band of dark feathers. If you think of the Red-tail’s belly band as a belt, the Roughie would be wearing a cummerbund.

Melissa Hill photograph

LEGS: Here, at least, we can narrow our choice down to two birds. **Swainson's** and **Red-tails** both have bare legs with the feathers stopping a few inches above the feet. **Ferruginous** and **Rough-legged** feathers extend to the tops of their feet.



The dark reddish leg feathers on the **Ferruginous** are quite noticeable next to their light bellies.

Richard W. Daniels photograph, courtesy Yellowstone Slide Library



Rough-legged Hawk (notice the cummerbund?)

Richard W. Daniels photograph, courtesy Yellowstone Slide Library

IN FLIGHT: This is your best chance of correctly identifying a soaring hawk.



Swainson's are normally easy to identify since the underside of their wings is half dark, half light. Turkey Vultures have a somewhat similar pattern. Swainson's Hawks have the light half toward the front of their wing, whereas vultures have light colors at the back of the wing.

Melissa Hill photograph



Red-tailed Hawks are best identified by a few characteristics: The red tail of an adult, the belly band, a leading edge of dark on the front of the wing, and "comma" or "apostrophe" marks at the "wrist" joints.

Melissa Hill photograph



The most identifiable feature of **Ferruginous Hawks** in flight is the dark "V" shape made by their legs. They can look similar to Red-tails but the legs are a definite giveaway. Sometimes you can even see that big yellow mouth while they fly.

Alan Vernon photograph



Rough-legged Hawks in flight typically show off their dark cummerbunds, as well as a large, dark, circular patch at each "wrist" joint.

Melissa Hill photograph

I hope these suggestions and hints will help you out in the field. Always remember to consider the season and, if possible, snap a picture to analyze later. Not only will you be able to zoom in on the image, but you also will have a memory to look back on any time. Also remember not to take identification too seriously—that Swainson's Hawk on the post won't be offended if you call it a Red-tailed Hawk!

If you'd like guides to help you specifically identify hawks I highly suggest the following:

- ✓ ***Hawks from Every Angle: How to Identify Raptors in Flight*, by Jerry Liguori. 2005.**
- ✓ ***Hawks at a Distance: Identifying Migrant Raptors*, by Jerry Liguori. 2011.**
- ✓ ***Hawks in Flight: Second Edition*, by Pete Dunne. 2012**
- ✓ ***A Photographic Guide to North American Raptors*, by Brian K. Wheeler. 2003.**

*** Editor's note: We've printed this special "ID Insert" in full color so you can refer to it when out in the field. We hope to offer such "ID Inserts" as a regular feature at least once each year.**