

A hike through any East Bay Regional Park, no matter the season, will provide the visitor with spectacular views. Often, upon looking up, the hiker will be treated to the breathtaking sight of a majestic bird of prey riding thermal updrafts against a backdrop of brilliant blue. Soaring, spinning, diving, kiting, these aerial acrobats are graceful masters of the skies. Yet, to songbirds, meadow voles, rabbits, snakes, and lizards, these powerful and efficient airborne hunters must be the stuff of nightmares.

Fierce predators, raptors are equipped with strong feet and needle-sharp talons, keen eyesight (some are three times as sharp as humans), and powerful hooked bills. Designed for killing, their dietary preferences vary widely as do their hunting styles.

Hawks, eagles, and falcons are diurnal predators, looking for prey during daylight hours, whereas most species of owls are nocturnal or nighttime hunters. The turkey vulture, although equipped with a strong bill, has weak legs and feet and is an opportunistic carnivore, eating mostly carrion, leftovers from other animal species or road-kills. Some hawks, like the Cooper's and sharp-shinned, are woodland hunters skilled at maneuvering with speed and agility between tree trunks and branches to snatch unsuspecting songbirds. Others, like the red-tailed, are open-country hawks soaring over hills and grasslands in search of unwary rodents.

Nesting sites and habits are highly variable with some species choosing tree cavities while others nest on the ground or build stick platforms high in the foliage canopy.

In addition, all raptor young are considered "altricial" or blind and helpless at birth. Newly hatched young are covered with downy fuzz and show their "egg tooth" a small horny nub on the upper bill, which allows the bird to break open its shell. This structure, which falls off soon after hatching occurs, provides evidence of the ancestral connection between birds and reptiles since young snakes and lizards also possess an egg tooth. Both male and female raptor parents are involved in the care and feeding of their babies which take several weeks to reach fledgling maturity. Even after fledging, a begging young raptor will often receive hand-outs from an attentive parent.

As birding becomes an increasingly popular pastime, identifying the abundantly varied species which inhabit our yards and local parks can be a fun and exciting challenge. Birds of prey with their comparatively large size, conspicuous appearance and graceful flight patterns can be some of the easiest and most thrilling to recognize. With some basic knowledge of field markings, identifying your local raptor can be a snap, especially if you are equipped with a pair of binoculars.

The following descriptions will help you learn our common, resident raptors. Once you are "bitten by the birding bug" you can use a field guide (see "Further Reading") to identify spring and fall migrants. Additionally, many informative birding programs are offered by East Bay Regional Park District Naturalists.

of both species provides excellent camouflage when these birds are perched quietly within the woodland canopy. Look for them while hiking by pausing periodically to peer into dense thickets. You may surprise yourself with a lucky sighting. Both the sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawk are listed by the state as "species of special concern."

FURTHER READING:

The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America, David Allen Sibley, ISBN 0-679-45121-8

Birds of Northern California, David Fix and Andy Bezener, ISBN 1-55105-227-X

Raptors of California, Hans Peeters & Pam Peeters, ISBN 0-520-24200-9



Golden Gate Audubon Society's website

The East Bay Regional Park District is dedicated to establishing parklands for all to enjoy while protecting thousands of acres of wildlife habitat. As natural habitat in surrounding areas is reduced, the need to protect vulnerable wildlife becomes increasingly vital. We hope that as you learn more about the natural history of our area, you will choose to become a conservationist and steward of our precious Bay Area wildlands.



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Red-tailed Hawk (also bottom cover photo)
Buteo jamaicensis
L 18-25" WS 46-58"

A large brownish hawk with dark borders on the leading edge of its wings soars on seemingly motionless wings over grassy hillsides. Watch the fanned tail closely as the bird dips and turns. Caught in sunlight at the right angle the rust-red coloration of the tail feathers on the adult red-tailed hawk is revealed. One of California's most common hawks, this bird often perches on utility poles, tree limbs, and rock outcrops where its distinctive horizontal streaked brown belly-band is easily seen. This helps to identify even the immature red-tailed, which has a brown and white banded tail during its first year. The well-known squealing scream of this hawk is another of its distinguishing characteristics, although many jays can produce an imitation call which is similar. Light and dark phases in plumage are common with this hawk and can cause difficulty with identification. To avoid confusion, look for the belly-band, the patagials (a dark bar on the underside of each wing at the wrist) and

listen for the call. Red-tailed hawks prey on small mammals, as well as birds, reptiles, and amphibians.



Jerry Ting

Red-shouldered Hawk
Buteo lineatus
L 19" WS 40"

This colorful hawk is a perch-hunter. Selecting a prominent position on a high branch or post with a good view of fields, ponds, and lakes, the red-shouldered waits and watches, ready to pounce on mice, snakes, and frogs. Smaller than the red-tailed hawk, the red-shouldered has prominent rust-red shoulder patches and striking white-edged, charcoal-gray body feathering. Nesting high in tree crotches, pairs of red-shouldered hawks become quite vocal, producing loud shrieking call-sequences as they defend their nesting and hunting territory.

L = Body length from bill tip to tail tip
WS = Wing span

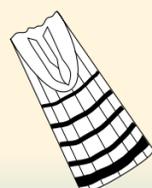


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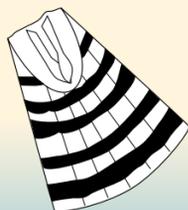
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Sharp-shinned & Cooper's Hawks
Accipiter striatus & *Accipiter cooperii*
L 12" WS 24" L 17" WS 37"

Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks inhabit forested groves and patches of dense vegetation where they fly swiftly, silently, and with great agility between networks of branches in pursuit of their preferred prey: small birds. Both species sometimes shock homeowners by snatching unwary songbirds from their bird feeders. So similar are these species in their appearance and behavior that they must be distinguished by size and tail shape. The Cooper's hawk (see photo) is larger in both length and wingspan than its smaller relative and has a distinctly rounded tail, while the "Sharpie" has a sharply squared tail. The mottled coloring



sharp-shinned hawk



Cooper's hawk

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www.nativeplants.org

This brochure is provided as a public service of the Interpretive and Recreation Services Department of the East Bay Regional Park District.

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Common Raptors of the East Bay Regional Parks



East Bay Regional Park District
www.ebparks.org



Jerry Ting

White-tailed Kite (also top cover photo)
Elanus leucurus
L 17" WS 40"

The pale coloring and graceful flight of this raptor make the white-tailed kite one of our most elegant birds of prey. Formerly known as the black-shouldered kite, the striking black "shoulder" patches on the pale gray wings are a key diagnostic feature on the kite. Kites will sometimes perch on tree limbs or snags, but are not often seen on poles or fences. When hunting, kites hover ("kiting") watchfully until a rodent is sighted. Then, in a rapid descent, the bird drops silently, feet-first onto its prey. At close range with binoculars, you will notice the kite's ruby-red eyes. Kites hunt mostly small rodents, like voles and field mice; less frequently, large insects and lizards are taken. The white-tailed kite is listed by the state as a "fully protected species."



Jerry Ting

American Kestrel
Falco sparverius
L 8" WS 24"

No larger than a western robin, the kestrel is our smallest California falcon. Unlike its larger falcon relatives who perform high-speed dives to snatch other birds out of the air, the kestrel's hunting behavior is more similar to the kite. Hovering in a stationary position, wings flapping rapidly high over a prey site, this bird scans the ground. When potential food (often a large, juicy insect) is spotted, the kestrel dives to the ground to grab it. Preferring mostly insects, kestrels vary their diet with small birds, mice, snakes, and lizards. Look for what appears to be a small hawk that flies toward the top of a pole or branch, landing with two or three bobbing motions of its tail. The male is striking with blue-gray wings and a bright rust-brown back. The female has a rust-brown back and wings. Both sexes have two vertical facial stripes bordering the eyes.

Burrowing Owl
Athene cunicularia

L 9" WS 21-24"

You are most likely to find a burrowing owl in a grassy meadow with ground squirrel burrows. This small, round-headed, golden-eyed owl co-exists with ground squirrels, nesting in abandoned burrows. Occasionally, the burrowing owl may be spotted perched on a fence-post or a rock where its long featherless legs make for a striking figure. One of the few owls more likely to be seen during the day, this species has grown increasingly scarce in Northern California due to habitat loss and efforts to eliminate burrowing mammals which, in turn, eliminates nesting habitat. The burrowing owl is now listed by the state as a "species of special concern."



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Turkey Vulture
Cathartes aura
L 32" WS 72"

Known to some as the garbage collector of the bird world, the turkey vulture provides a needed service in nature: quick, efficient disposal of carrion. Look for a large dark bird with a featherless, fleshy, red head. During flight, the wings are held at an up-tilted "V" angle and the primary feathers are separated often distinctly enough to count. The two-toned, silver-black underwings are also distinctive in flight. As the turkey vulture tilts and soars effortlessly overhead riding a thermal, keenly attuned for signs and scents of animal carcasses, note the time between wingbeats for demonstration of aerial skill and grace.

L = Body length from bill tip to tail tip
WS = Wing span



Jerry Ting

Northern Harrier
Circus cyaneus
L 18" WS 43"

One of the easiest hawks to identify in flight, the harrier (formerly known as the marsh hawk) often flies very low, tilting side-to-side as it cruises over marsh and meadow. This low-flying behavior of the harrier often reveals its most prominent field mark, the distinctive white rump-patch, which can be spotted from a ¼ mile away. Northern harriers are sexually dimorphic. The female is larger and brown, while the smaller male is gray with black wing tips. Because this raptor hunts by sound as well as sight, the harrier has a facial disk, (a circular ridge of feathering around the face) similar to owls, which helps direct sound waves toward its ears. During spring, watch for the spectacular, aerial, courtship display of the male. Nesting usually occurs on the ground in a carefully guarded patch of dense vegetation.



Jerry Ting

Barn Owl
Tyto alba
L 16" WS 42"

This owl has adapted to living near humans by roosting and nesting in human-built structures like old barns or abandoned buildings. Unfortunately, the reduction of hunting habitat in marshes, farms, and ranch lands has reduced the owl's numbers. Also roosting in hollow trees and caves, the barn owl hunts strictly at night for small rodents, but will take snakes, lizards, large insects, and birds. The dark eyes set in a white facial disk, the long legs and pale body of the barn owl give it an unmistakable and eerie appearance.



Jerry Ting

Golden Eagle
Aquila chrysaetos
L 40" WS 88"

A sighting of this majestic, endangered fully protected species is more common in the East Bay Regional Parks than one might expect and is always a breathtaking experience. With a wingpan exceeding seven feet, the golden eagle is hard to mistake for another bird. The East Bay has the highest density of nesting golden eagles anywhere in the world. This eagle can be seen at much closer range as it hunts ground squirrels and other rodents in the fields, meadows, and foothills of our bay area landscape. Look for an all dark bird, much larger than a vulture. Through binoculars the blonde-gold feathers at the nape behind the head can often be seen. Immature birds show prominent white patches in the wings and tail. Golden eagles are famous for their spectacular flight acrobatics during courtship displays.

Great-Horned Owl
Bubo virginianus
L 22" WS 44"

The large "ear-tufts" and huge golden eyes of the great-horned owl which give it a distinctly cat-like appearance can both startle and delight the unsuspecting hiker who spots our most widespread bird of prey. A nocturnal hunter, the eyes of this owl are set within a facial disk which collects and directs sound waves and allows the bird to find its prey in nearly complete darkness. Small mammals, insects, reptiles, and amphibians make up the varied diet of this predator. Because of its minimal sense of smell, skunks are often a preferred meal! Although usually solitary, the great-horned, because of its large size and presence in many habitats is our most commonly seen owl.

Jerry Ting

