

Bald Eagle

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

Length: 27-35" **Wing Span:** 71-89"

Huge, with a striking white head and tail, the bald eagle in adult plumage is probably one of the most widely recognized birds on the planet. Primarily a fish eater, this majestic "sea-eagle" also frequently dines on carrion (including marine mammals and deer). Notorious for snatching fish from osprey, they also catch their own waterfowl and mammals as large as raccoons. Re-used year after year, their sturdy stick nests can measure up to 10 feet across. Once ravaged by the effects of DDT, the bald eagle population has made such a striking comeback that they were removed from the U.S. Endangered Species list in 2007. Migrating bald eagles are occasionally seen along the shores of San Francisco Bay, but for a more reliable sighting, head to Lake Del Valle or Lake Chabot, where nesting pairs have become more frequent in recent years.



Photo: Marc Crumpler

Golden Eagle

Aquila chrysaetos

Length: 40" **Wing Span:** 88"

The East Bay has the highest density of nesting golden eagles anywhere in the world. This eagle can often be seen at close range cruising low over the hilly open grasslands that make up its preferred habitat in search of rabbits, ground squirrels and other small mammals. With a wingspan that can exceed seven feet, the golden eagle is hard to mistake for another bird. Adults are dark overall, with blonde-gold feathers at the nape behind the head. Immature birds show prominent white patches in the wings and tail. Golden eagles are famous for their spectacular flight acrobatics during courtship, and most pairs mate for life.



Photo: Marc Crumpler



Northern Harrier

Circus cyaneus

Length: 18" **Wing Span:** 43"

One of the easiest hawks to identify in flight, the northern harrier or "marsh hawk" often flies very low, tilting side-to-side as it cruises over marsh and meadow. The female is larger and brown, while the smaller male is gray with black wing tips. Both sport a distinctive white rump-patch, which can be spotted from a ¼ mile away. This raptor hunts by sound as well as sight, aided by a facial disk, (a circular ridge of feathering around the face) similar to owls, which helps direct sound waves toward its ears. Nesting usually occurs on the ground in a carefully guarded patch of dense vegetation.

Photo: David Desanick



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Coyote Hills Regional Park, Fremont
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Del Valle Regional Park, Livermore
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On the cover: Red-tailed hawk

Photo: Dennis Stanworth

Other photos courtesy Jerry Ting unless otherwise noted.

Bugs go here

20200828

Common Raptors in the East Bay Regional Park District



Look – a hawk!

From a child just beginning to discover the wonders of nature to an experienced birder, the sight of one of these large birds is a thrill for many visitors to the parks. The protected open spaces of the East Bay Regional Park District provide important habitat for a wide variety of birds of prey, including eagles, hawks, owls, and falcons, collectively known as raptors.

From the Latin “rapere”, meaning “to seize”, raptors are predatory birds with specialized features that allow them to catch and eat other animals, sometimes in mid-air! These include:

- Strong feet with claws called talons for grasping and piercing.
- Heavy, hooked bills for tearing and cutting through flesh.
- Exceptional vision for locating prey from high in the air.

Raptors are also masters of flight, with powerful wings that allow them to migrate long distances, as well as to soar, dive, glide, and hover in pursuit of their meals.

Is it any wonder that these magnificent animals have come to symbolize freedom and self-sufficiency? But even the most powerful raptors face threats to their survival. Habitat loss happens when we build on or near natural areas, affecting the availability of prey or suitable nesting sites. Poisoning from lead shot and rat poisons is a growing concern. Increasing urbanization brings more collisions with autos, power lines, and wind turbines, as well as illegal trapping, shooting, and harassment.

Fortunately, many of these human-caused factors can be prevented or mitigated. Hunting and fishing can be enjoyed without using lead shot or sinkers, and simple rat traps are a raptor-friendly alternative to poisons. New wind turbine designs

Peregrine Falcon



minimize the risk to raptors, as do perches placed above high voltage electrical towers. Photographers and rock-climbers can take care to avoid disturbing nesting pairs, and all of us can advocate for clean water, clean air, and conservation of open spaces. Learning about the birds of prey in your parks and sharing your enthusiasm with others is important too, as developing an appreciation for wild things leads to concern for their protection.

The following descriptions will get you started in identifying our most common raptors. Field guides, phone apps (see “Additional Resources”), and guided walks offered by East Bay Regional Park District naturalists and local Audubon chapters are excellent ways to expand your knowledge.

Following the common names in bold print are the Latin, or scientific, names of the birds in italics. Measurements of body length from bill tip to tail tip and wing span are listed as a range, since most female raptors are considerably larger than their male counterparts, a condition known as reverse sexual size dimorphism.

Additional Resources

Mobile Apps

- **eBird** A free online database of bird distribution and abundance. See ebird.org or an app store.
- **Merlin Bird ID** (Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.) Free instant bird identification at allaboutbirds.org or an app store.

Books

- **Birds of Prey: Hawks, Eagles, Falcons, and Vultures of North America** Dunne, Pete. 2017. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. ISBN-10: 0544018443
- **Peterson Field Guide to Birds of Western North America, 4th Edition** Peterson, Roger Tory. 2010. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. ISBN: 0547152701



Red-tailed Hawk

Red-tailed Hawk

Buteo jamaicensis

Length: 18-25” **Wing Span:** 46-58”

That hawk you see every morning at the freeway on-ramp? Probably a red-tailed hawk. Common and widespread, this large hawk often perches on utility and fence poles where its distinctive brown belly-band stands out beneath its white bib. This helps to identify even the immature red-tailed, which has a brown and white banded tail during its first year, rather than the distinctive rusty-red tail of the adult. The majestic scream of this hawk is also distinctive, although many jays can produce an imitation call which can fool even an experienced hawk watcher. Red-tails prey on small mammals, as well as birds, reptiles, and amphibians, and prefer to hunt in open habitat with plentiful perches.

Photo: Mary Mallick

Sharp-shinned Hawk

Accipiter striatus

Length: 9-13” **Wing Span:** 20-26”



Sharp-shinned Hawk

- Smaller head
- Squared tail



Coopers Hawk

- Larger protruding head
- Rounded tail

Cooper's Hawk

Accipiter cooperii

Length: 14-20” **Wing Span:** 28-34”

The short, rounded wings, slender bodies, and long tails of the Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks allow them to fly swiftly through dense forests in pursuit of their preferred prey: small birds. Both species sometimes snatch unwary songbirds from suburban backyard bird feeders.

Subtle differences in head and tail shape, along with size, help birdwatchers distinguish between the two species. The Cooper's Hawk (see photo) is larger, has a rounded tail, and its large, blocky head projects forward of the wings in flight. The smaller, dove-sized “Sharpie” appears delicate, with twig-like legs, a squared-edged tail, and a small head that is in line with the wings when seen from below. Both the Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawk are listed by the state as “species of special concern.”

Red-shouldered Hawk

Buteo lineatus

Length: 15-19” **Wing Span:** 37-42”

Smaller than the red-tailed hawk, the red-shouldered hawk has rufous-orange underparts, blackish wings with white spotting, and a black and white banded tail. This colorful hawk is often spotted in forested areas such as oak woodlands, riparian woods and eucalyptus groves. Their large stick nests are refurbished for use year after year by both adults and are often “decorated” with a spray of green leaves. Nesting pairs become quite vocal, producing loud shrieking calls as they defend their territory. A perch-hunter, the red-shouldered waits and watches, ready to pounce on mice, small birds, snakes, and frogs.



Red-shouldered Hawk

Photo: Lee Greengrass

Common Raptors in the East Bay Regional Park District



Turkey Vulture

Cathartes aura
Length: 23-32" **Wing Span:** 55-63"

Turkey vultures lack the strong feet of true raptors and rarely kill their own food. Instead, they scavenge for carrion (dead animals), using their keen sight and sense of smell on long flights that often skim the treetops. During flight, the wings are held at an up-tilted "V" angle and the two-toned, silver-black underwings are distinctive. The lack of feathers on their heads makes them appear small-headed in comparison with other large, soaring birds, and at close range the bare red flesh of the adult is conspicuous (juvenile vultures have a dark gray head). Widespread and common, you're almost certain to see a turkey vulture riding the warm air currents over any of our parklands.



Osprey

Pandion haliaetus
Length: 21-26" **Wing Span:** 59-67"

Exclusively a fish eater, this large, strikingly handsome hawk is most often seen near lakes, rivers, or bays. The only raptor capable of diving completely underwater to capture its prey, the osprey has dense, oily feathers that repel water, and a reversible outer toe on its large, spike-lined feet that ensures a snug hold on its slippery meal. Their long, crooked wings may assist in launching from the water, and, along with their predominately white undersides and boldly marked heads, make the "fish hawk" easy to identify.



American Kestrel

Falco sparverius
Length: 9-10" **Wing Span:** 21-22"

No larger than a robin, the kestrel is our smallest North American falcon. A handsome bird, male kestrels have blue-grey wings and a single, broad black band on a bright rusty tail. Females are rusty brown with narrow dark bars all over, including the tail. Both have boldly marked faces, including a vertical line or "mustache" below the eye. The "sparrow hawk" is often found perched on utility lines in open areas, where it hunts for its prey, which includes earthworms, grasshoppers, small birds, mice, and lizards. Like other falcons, they don't build their own nests, but instead use a large woodpecker hole, a secluded platform in a barn, or a niche on a rocky cliff. Formerly abundant, the American kestrel population has declined rapidly since the 1980s for unknown reasons.



Prairie Falcon

Falco mexicanus
Length: 14-18" **Wing Span:** 36-44"

The prairie falcon is the pale, inland counterpart of the more widespread peregrine falcon, which it closely resembles in size and shape. Its muted cream, brown, and grey colors blend closely with the arid bluffs and rocky cliffs where it makes its home. Look for the dark "armpits" below the wings on a prairie falcon as it cruises above open grasslands hunting for the small mammals that make up most of its diet. Falcon eggs are tapered at one end so that they will roll in a circle, an important feature for a bird that lays its eggs on a rocky ledge high above the ground.



Peregrine Falcon

Falco peregrinus
Length: 14-19.5" **Wing Span:** 38-44"

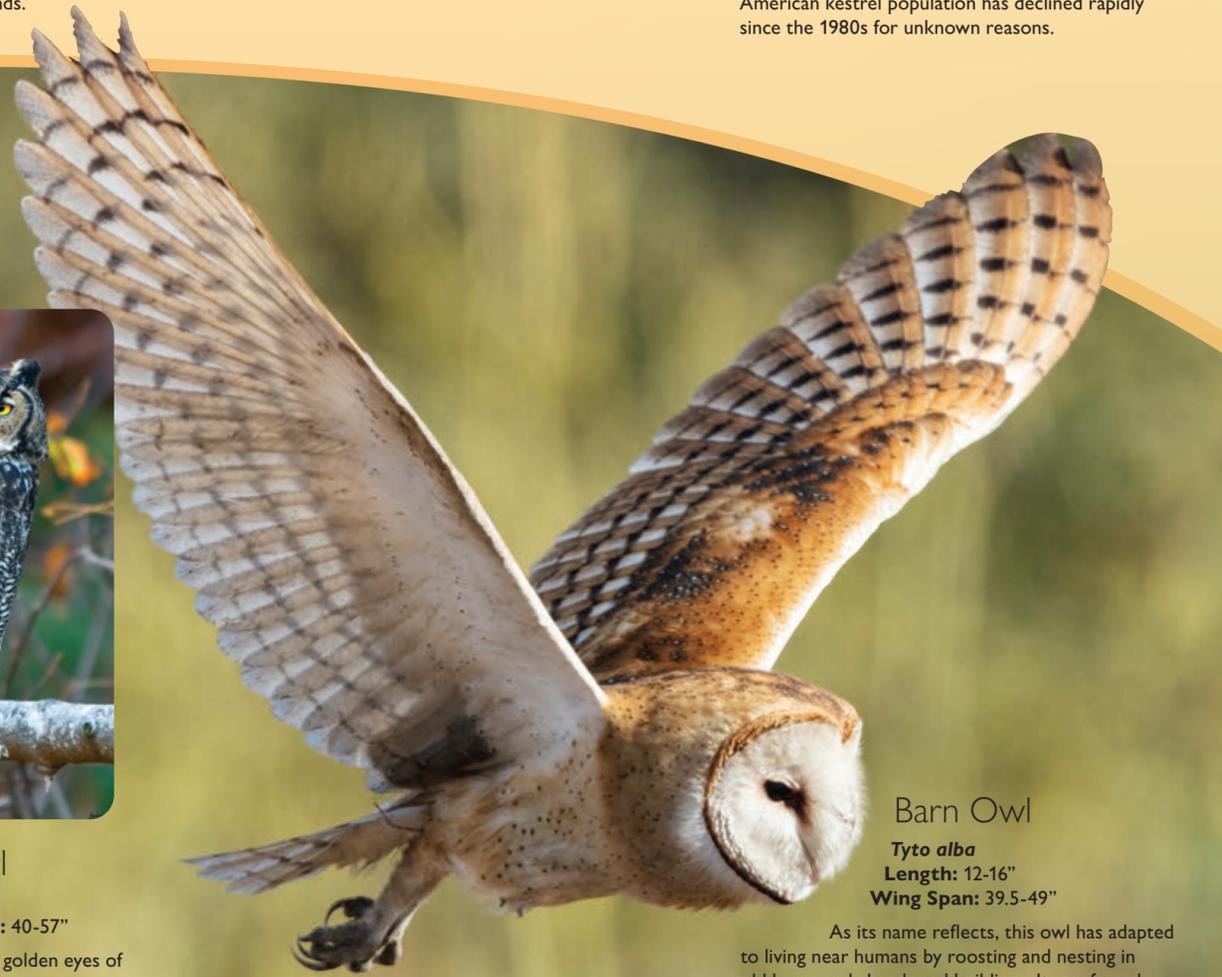
Famous for its speed and hunting ability, the peregrine falcon's ability to dive through the air at speeds exceeding 200 miles per hour makes it the fastest animal in the world. Most often encountered along shorelines, where they hunt ducks and shorebirds, they also frequently nest on tall buildings in urban areas where pigeons are a mainstay of their diet. This striking bird sports a steely blue-gray helmet and dark back over mostly barred underparts. Still recovering from near extinction prior to the banning of DDT, the peregrine falcon is a reminder of the unintended and disastrous consequences of the overuse of pesticides on our wildlife.



Great-Horned Owl

Bubo virginianus
Length: 18-25" **Wing Span:** 40-57"

The large feather tufts and huge golden eyes of the great-horned owl give our most widespread owl a cat-like appearance. Small mammals such as rabbits, mice, ground squirrels, and opossums make up most of the diet of this nocturnal hunter. One of the few predators to regularly dine on skunk, great-horned owls have a terrible sense of smell, as you might have guessed. These large owls nest early in the year, often taking over a used hawk nest, although tree holes, stumps, and caves are other options. Also known as the hoot owl, their deep hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo, hoo calls carry far through the night.



Barn Owl

Tyto alba
Length: 12-16" **Wing Span:** 39.5-49"

As its name reflects, this owl has adapted to living near humans by roosting and nesting in old barns and abandoned buildings. Its preferred diet of rats, mice, and other small mammals make it a welcome addition to many a farm or ranch, and some land owners erect wooden nest boxes especially for them to assist in rodent control. In suburban yards, look for golf ball-sized pellets of regurgitated hair and bones at the base of palm trees, a preferred roosting site. The barn owl's large, white facial disk contributes to their exceptional hearing, allowing it to locate prey in absolute darkness. Serrated feather margins allow barn owls to fly silently, with only their eerie, screeching calls revealing their presence.



Burrowing Owl

Athene cucularia
Length: 7.5-10" **Wing Span:** 21.5-24"

One of the few owls likely to be seen during the day, the burrowing owl can often be found standing on the ground next to its nest, an abandoned ground squirrel burrow. Round-headed and long-legged, this small owl eats a variety of large insects and small mammals as well as the occasional lizard or frog. As open spaces give way to strip malls and housing developments, these charismatic birds have grown increasingly scarce, and are now listed by the state of California as a "species of special concern." Shoreline parks are the best places to find burrowing owls in the East Bay, although they're occasionally spotted on grassland-covered hills farther inland.



White-tailed Kite

Elanus leucurus
Length: 15" **Wing Span:** 39-43"

The pale coloring and graceful flight of the white-tailed kite make it one of our most elegant birds of prey. The striking black "shoulder" patches on the pale gray wings are a key diagnostic feature, and at close range with binoculars, you will also notice the kite's ruby-red eyes. When hunting, kites hover watchfully until a rodent is sighted. Then, in a rapid descent, the bird drops silently, feet-first onto its prey. 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."