

## Birds of Prey from



- Denny Olson, Flathead Audubon Conservation Educator

Even for reasonably good birders, identifying raptors as they fly by overhead (at 100 mph-plus!) can be intimidating. But if you are interested in getting better at it, 'ya gotta start somewhere'. I'm going to try to help by eliminating the "noise" of looking at the whole bird and not knowing where to concentrate for ID purposes.

This is only *my* process (at my intermediate state of skills), and you may already have one that works for you, and you may look for field marks that I may not know about. I'm accustomed to being taken with a grain of salt, so this method is for what it's worth.

The 17 most common fall raptor migrants here in the Flathead fall into basic family categories of Accipiters (3 species), Buteos (5 species), Eagles (2), Harrier (1), Vulture (1) and Osprey (1). The Falcons (4) are birds of prey but not in the grouping of "hawks". They are most closely related to parrots and other songbirds (even hummingbirds!).

***If you are using this handout as a key to the full-sized, colored silhouettes on display, the numbers in this handout correspond to numbers on small round stickers on the tail of each bird. Yellow stickers signify adult plumage and red stickers juvenile plumage. Please note that some of the silhouettes have the adult and juvenile plumages on opposite sides, so turn them over! Also, the Eagle silhouettes have different plumages on the right and left halves of the silhouette.***

So, the first order of business:

1. **Look at the overall shape of the bird!** (this will greatly reduce the number of birds to consider)

**Accipiters:** short, rounded wings and long tail



**Buteos:** large, broad wings and short tails, often spread wide



**Falcons:** narrowing, pointed wings





**Harrier:** longer, narrow wings and long tail



**Vulture:** broad wings held in an upward "V" shape (dihedral), tiny head



**Osprey:** long, crooked and arched wings



**Eagles:** long and broad wings (like a huge buteo)

**2. How is the bird flying?** (flight behavior)

**3. Light and dark markings**

**4. Colors (if they can be seen)**

**Note:** Size is usually an unreliable characteristic, because of distance and nothing to compare in the sky.

**With all that in mind, here's what I look for, in order of preference, for each bird.**

**Accipiters:**

**Sharp-shinned Hawk (1, 2)**

- a. flap-flap-flap-flap -- glide (repeated)
- b. gets bounced around a lot in 10 mph+ wind
- c. squared-off tail
- d. narrow white edge on tail
- e. small head

**Cooper's Hawk (3, 4)**

- a. flap-flap-flap, but longer glides
- b. powers through the wind without bouncing
- c. slightly longer tail than SS, middle feathers longer (rounded)
- d. wider white edge on tail

- e. large-looking head, relative to the body size

### **Northern Goshawk**

- a. slower, stiff and powerful wingbeats (because it's much larger)
- b. wings narrow toward ends faster than other accipiters
- c. adults uniformly medium gray below (5)
- d. juveniles have buffy-brown dense belly-streaking (6)

## **Buteos:**

### **Red-tailed Hawk (7)**

- a. dark inner leading edge on wings and mid-wing "comma"
- b. orange tail on adults is lighter from below
- c. shows a slight to dark belly-band, depending on the color morph
- d. has a slight dihedral incoming
- e. migrating, tends to soar to gain altitude and then stiff steady wingbeats
- f. dark head

Note: Normally, we have light-morph adults and juveniles, which look like the adults but don't have the orange tail. But later in migration, very dark morph adults, Harlan's morph, and sometimes a very white Krider's morph can show up. Forewarned: Red-tails come in many colors!

### **Rough-legged hawk (8)**

- a. female and juvie -- large, dark rectangles on leading edge, mid-wing
- b. light tan head, very dark lower belly
- c. males can be very dark except for primary flight feathers
- d. wings are broad to the very ends
- e. late migrant; shows up in the Flathead as a winter resident

### **Swainson's Hawk (9)**

- a. our only buteo with dark rear wings and light front wings; "black is back"
- b. chestnut-colored "bib" on light adult
- c. much rufous-colored chest and wings on the intermediate morph

### **Ferruginous Hawk (10)**

- a. clean white undersides
- b. folded legs shaped like a rusty "V" against the white
- c. light tail
- d. less than 10% dark morph, few intermediates

### **Broad-winged Hawk (11)**

- a. wide black and white bands on the tail
- b. small buteo that soars in circles (kettles) and then uses elevation to migrate
- c. outer and trailing wing edges edged in black

## **Falcons:**

### **American Kestrel**

- a. very shallow rapid wingbeats, seems light and buoyant
- b. females flash a lot of orange coloration (12)
- c. males flash brighter orange, with blue-gray upper wings (13)
- d. black "moustache" cheek-patch and "sideburns"

### **Merlin (14)**

- a. strong, speedy flight -- glides like a bullet

- b. buffy and streaked, with a multi-barred tail
- c. weak "moustache"
- c. pugnacious, usually attacks owl decoy multiple times

**Peregrine Falcon**

- a. smooth, powerful wingbeats (really, really fast)
- b. dark "moustache" (no sideburns)
- c. adults uniform gray below with white upper chest (15)
- d. juveniles uniformly brown spotted and barred below (16)

**Prairie Falcon**

- a. similar to Peregrine, but light brown markings on white background (17)
- b. juveniles with similar markings, but *darker* brown "armpits" (18)
- c. light brown "moustache"

**Harriers:**

**Northern Harrier**

- a. long slender wings and tail
- b. female brown with prominent bars on underwing (19)
- c. male pale gray, very white below, black wingtips and inner trailing edges (20)
- d. hunts in a dihedral shape, but migrates with flat wings

**Eagles:**

**Golden Eagle:**

- a. adults all dark with golden head and shoulders (21)
- b. juveniles dark with white center-wing patches and front of tail (22)
- c. slow, powerful wing-beats, but often glides into the wind without moving
- d. likes to migrate later in the fall, and later in the day

**Bald Eagle:**

- a. adults dark brown with obvious white head and tail
- b. first-year juveniles dark brown with patchy white markings below (23)
- c. second-year juveniles show more white on the belly and wings (24)
- d. third-year juveniles begin to show whiter head and tail, like adults
- e. rarer migrant -- only moves to find open water, common year-round resident

**Vultures:**

**Turkey Vulture: (26)**

- a. black, with light gray outer and trailing wing feathers
- b. deep dihedral wings, seldom flaps but often rocks side-to-side
- c. looks almost headless from a distance (Ichabod Crane?)

**Ospreys:**

**Osprey: (27)**

- a. Long arched and crooked wings
- b. dark brown wrist, primary and secondary feathers, otherwise white
- c. dark eye stripe on whitish head