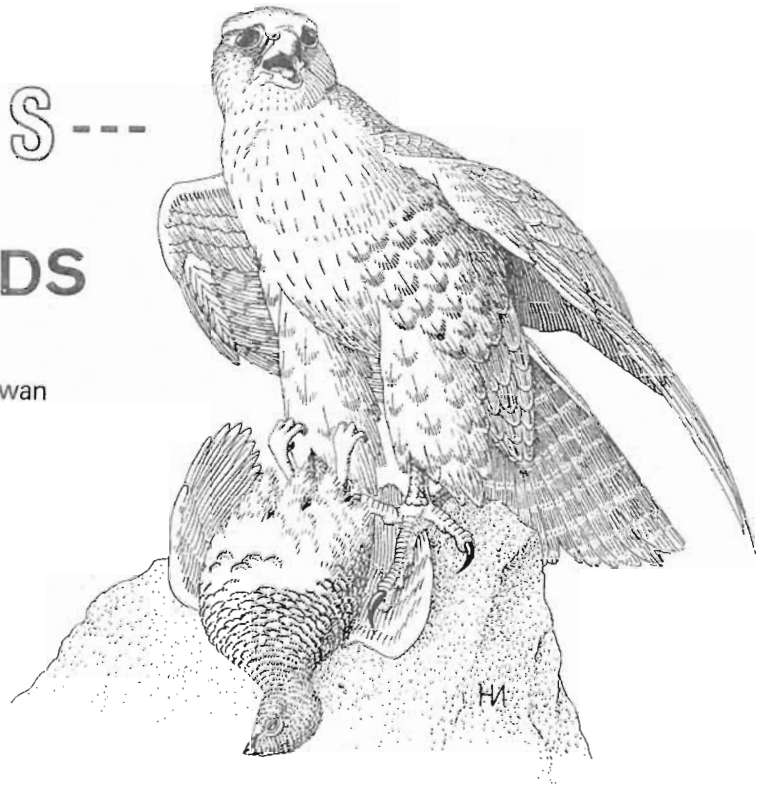


# HAWKS & FALCONS ---

## VERY SPECIAL BIRDS

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HAWKS ARE BIRDS OF PREY and like other predators have long been persecuted because they feed on other animals. But predators play an important role in the scheme of nature and research is now beginning to reveal the relationship of these very specialized birds to the environment.

Most hawks fall into one of the three major groups that can be easily identified when a bird is in flight. The *buteos* are soaring hawks with chunky bodies, broad rounded wings, and fan-shaped tails. Buteos found in Alaska are: the rough-legged hawk (*Buteo lagopus*), the red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), the Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), the Harlan's hawk (*Buteo harlani*), the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), and the bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). Buteos are summer residents in most of the state, but there is probably a wintering population of red-tailed hawks and both species of eagle in Southeastern Alaska.

The *falcons* have streamlined bodies, pointed wings and long narrow tails. Unlike the buteos, falcons fly with short rapid wing beats and usually do not soar for long periods. Three species nest in Alaska but migrate south in the fall, and the fourth is a year-round resident. The peregrine falcon, or duck hawk (*Falco peregrinus*); the merlin, or pigeon hawk (*Falco columbarius*); and the kestrel, or sparrow hawk (*Falco sparverius*) are the three migratory species. The largest of the falcons, the gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*), is a permanent resident of Alaska's alpine and Arctic tundra regions. Peale's falcon, a subspecies of the peregrine, is probably a year-round resident on the Aleutians.

The *accipiters* are woodland hawks characterized by rounded wings and long narrow tails. When hunting, they take "stands" in trees or pursue game by moving through woodlands with quick wing beats interrupted by short glides. The sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) is the smallest of this group and is considered a migrant; however, some sharp-shins probably winter in Southeastern Alaska. The largest accipiter, the goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*), is

a year-round resident of Interior Alaska that is most commonly found in birch and aspen woods throughout the state.

Two other hawks nest in Alaska which are not members of these three groups. They are the harrier, or marsh hawk (*Circus cyaneus*), and the osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*). The marsh hawk is a slim bird with a white patch at the base of the tail, often seen flying low with deliberate wing beats. Its wings form a shallow V when the bird is gliding. The osprey frequents rivers or lakes and flies with a crook in its wings. Ospreys are often observed plunging into water in pursuit of fish.

Buteos subsist on small rodents, and to a lesser extent on hares and grouse. The golden eagle is a powerful hunter that eats hares, grouse, ptarmigan and ground squirrels. The bald eagle lives mainly on fish. Carrion is also important in the diet of most buteos. The peregrine and gyrfalcon live largely on grouse, ptarmigan, waterfowl and other small birds. Gyrfalcons have a broader diet than peregrines and often take small animals on the ground. Merlins take small birds, and kestrels eat insects, mice and other small rodents. The accipiters hunt grouse, hares and several species of small birds and mammals in dense woodlands. Rodents are the most important food of marsh hawks, and ospreys eat fish.

Buteos build large nests with sticks in trees, old buildings or on cliffs. Accipiters and merlins prefer to build stick nests in trees. A dead snag near water is often selected as a nesting site by the osprey, but they may nest on cliffs or even on the ground. Peregrines and gyrfalcons select cliffs as nest sites, while tree cavities are often used by kestrels. Ground nests are always used by marsh hawks. Most adult hawks return to the same general nesting area

each year, and the same nest is sometimes used for several years. Nests are vigorously defended by adults which employ noisy aerial displays and, occasionally, open attack.

Hawks do not raise large broods. Many Alaskan hawks have shown a decrease in the production of young in recent years. This is partly due to heavy use of pesticides in wintering areas. Because most prey species (food items) utilized by hawks in wintering areas are contaminated with pesticides, harmful amounts are concentrated in the predator. Many prey species wintering in the south nest in Alaska, and serve as a source of contamination to both migratory and resident hawks. Pesticide residues drastically affect productivity of the hawks by altering reproductive behavior, causing a decrease in eggshell thickness which increases chances for egg breakage, and causing a high proportion of embryos to die before hatching. This situation is cause for serious concern, especially with regard to all migratory hawks.

Hawks are important because they help insure against overpopulation of rodents and other animals. Certain species eat carrion, thus utilizing animals that die from numerous causes. The art of falconry has long been recognized as an effective and exciting method of taking

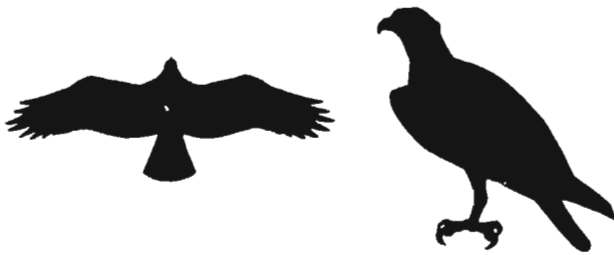
game. Beyond this, for ages people have been fascinated by the grace and power of hawks. There is an unmeasurable value in just seeing a bald eagle soaring high overhead or a peregrine falcon making a 100-foot dive at an unwary duck.

It is illegal to kill any bird of prey in Alaska, with the exception of snowy owls in some areas (see Alaska hunting regulations). A permit from the Commissioner of Fish and Game is required to possess a live hawk. Furthermore, the department keeps records on nesting areas, and works closely with other land managing agencies to insure protection of critical nest sites. These precautions are essential to insure perpetuation of these interesting and important birds for future generations. ■

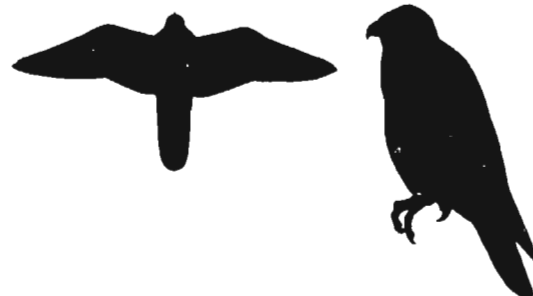
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### Silhouettes of Alaskan Birds of Prey

Osprey



Falcon



Buteo



Marsh Hawk



Accipiter



***Alaska***

# **FISH & GAME**

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ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1972

