

Seeing the Sourlands

Red-Tailed Hawk

By Jim Amon



Immature Red-tailed Hawk

I was sitting on the terrace of my rented Cape Cod home last summer, watching an immature Red-tailed Hawk in the driveway, when a taxi pulled up. The hawk fled to a nearby tree and the taxi driver jumped out of his cab. “Did you see that?!” he called. I said that I had. “I love Red-tailed Hawks,” he called, lifting his right leg in the air and pulling up his pant leg, revealing a large tattoo of a Red-tailed Hawk. I am sure that a lot of people—including me—love Red-tailed Hawks but I don’t know anyone else who feels compelled to express that emotion with a tattoo.

What is to love, you may be asking, about a bird that sees a darling little bunny, sinks its talons into its heart and then uses its razor-sharp beak to tear it into bite sized

pieces? Well, I have had to ask myself that same question and I have struggled to find an answer, but I find them beautiful and amazingly graceful in flight. Bird flight of any kind is one of the great wonders of life but when you see a three-pound creature flying and gliding with what looks like total disregard for gravity, it is especially amazing. Then again, maybe beauty alone is enough; it is enough for much else in life that we love.

Not only are Red-tailed Hawks large, graceful and beautiful, they are increasing in numbers all over America. They live for about twenty-five years, usually begin breeding at age three and produce one to four chicks every year. It is common to see smaller, more agile, birds—Starlings, Grackles and Blue Jays especially—protecting their territory by flying above Red-tails and pecking at their necks and wings, but Red-tails do not really have anything that predates on them once they are mature. (I have often wondered why the hawks don't do some kind of barrel roll and grab the small pests but it seems that to do so would be a big expenditure of energy and the pest bird does not have enough flesh to make it worth the effort.) Great horned owls will eat Red-tailed eggs and chicks and the two species frequently compete for nesting sites.

Red-tails are the most common hawk in our area but there are a number of other hawk species in the Sourlands; Sharp-shinned Hawks are the next most common species but there are also Coopers, Broad-winged and—rarely—Red-shouldered. (Sharp-shinned Hawks are the smallest hawk in New Jersey and are extremely agile fliers. They hunt birds in the Sourland forest, darting between branches in pursuit of their prey. Red-tails are generally in open areas, looking for rabbits, voles and other small mammals. The Sharp-shinned Hawk actually does have thinned, or "sharp" shins.)

There is wide variability in appearance among Red-tails in different parts of the country but those in the east are brown with a brick red tail (after they are a year old), white underparts with a mottled dark band across their bellies. They also have black wing tips. The females are 25% larger than the males.

Some Red Tails migrate and some do not so they can be seen year around in the Sourland.