

Bill light blue at the base, with the margins yellowish, the tip black; the cere yellow. Iris hazel. Feet yellow; claws black, at the base bluish. The general colour of the upper parts is chocolate-brown. The quills are of the general colour externally, but the primaries are black toward the tip; a great part of the inner web, with the shaft, white, and barred with brownish-black, the bars more extended on the secondaries. The tail is marked with about ten dusky bars on a reddish-brown ground, tinged with grey, the last dark bar broader, the tips paler. The eyelids are whitish, as is the throat, which is longitudinally streaked with dusky. The rest of the lower parts are yellowish or brownish-white, barred with brown. The lower wing-coverts are white, barred or spotted with dusky; the white of the inner webs of the primaries forms a conspicuous patch, contrasted with the greyish-black of their terminal portion.

Length to end of tail 23 inches; wing from flexure 17; tail $10\frac{1}{2}$; bill along the ridge $1\frac{8}{12}$, along the edge of lower mandible $1\frac{7}{12}$; tarsus $3\frac{5}{12}$; hind toe 1, its claw $1\frac{1}{12}$; middle toe $1\frac{10}{12}$, its claws $1\frac{1}{12}$.

Another specimen in my possession, procured by Mr. TOWNSEND on the plains of Snake River, has the upper parts brown, streaked and spotted with reddish-white; the upper tail-coverts white, barred with dusky, the lower parts as above described. The colours however vary, and in some the upper parts are deep brown, the lower reddish or brownish-white, barred with reddish-brown.

When compared with European specimens, mine have the bill somewhat stronger; but in all other respects, including the scutella and scales of the feet and toes, and the structure of the wings and tail, the parts are similar.

THE RED-TAILED BUZZARD.

†BUTEO BOREALIS, *Gmel.*

PLATE VII.—MALE AND FEMALE.

The Red-tailed Hawk (Buzzard) is a constant resident in the United States, in every part of which it is found. It performs partial migrations, during severe winters, from the Northern Districts towards the Southern. In the latter, however, it is at all times more abundant, and I shall endeavour to present you with a full account of its habits, as observed there.



Red-tailed Buzzard.

Its flight is firm, protracted, and at times performed at a great height. It sails across the whole of a large plantation, on a level with the tops of the forest trees which surround it, without a single flap of its wings, and is then seen moving its head sidewise to inspect the objects below. This flight is generally accompanied by a prolonged mournful cry, which may be heard at a considerable distance, and consists of a single sound resembling the monosyllable *Kae*, several times repeated, for three or four minutes, without any apparent inflection or difference of intensity. It would seem as if uttered for the purpose of giving notice to the living objects below that he is passing, and of thus inducing them to bestir themselves and retreat to a hiding-place, before they attain which he may have an opportunity of pouncing upon one of them. When he spies an animal, while he is thus sailing over a field, I have observed him give a slight check to his flight, as if to mark a certain spot with accuracy, and immediately afterwards alight on the nearest tree. He would then instantly face about, look intently on the object that had attracted his attention, soon after descend towards it with wings almost close to his body, and dart upon it with such accuracy and rapidity as seldom to fail in securing it.

When passing over a meadow, a cotton-field, or one planted with sugar-canes, he performs his flight close over the grass or plants, uttering no cry, but marking the prey in the manner above described, and on perceiving it, ascending in a beautiful curved line to the top of the nearest tree, after which he watches and dives as in the former case. Should he not observe any object worthy of his attention, while passing over a meadow or a field, he alights, shakes his feathers, particularly those of the tail, and, after spending a few minutes in pluming himself, leaves the perch, uttering his usual cry, and ascending in the air, performs large and repeated circular flights, carefully inspecting the field, to assure himself that there is in reality nothing in it that may be of use to him. He then proceeds to another plantation. At other times, as if not assured that his observations have been duly made, he rises in circles over the same field to an immense height, where he looks like a white dot in the heavens. Yet from this height he must be able to distinguish the objects on the ground, even when these do not exceed our little partridge or a young hare in size, and although their colour may be almost the same as that of surrounding bodies; for of a sudden his circlings are checked, his wings drawn close to his body, his tail contracted to its smallest breadth, and he is seen to plunge headlong towards the earth, with a rapidity which produces a loud rustling sound nearly equal to that of an Eagle on a similar occasion.

Should he not succeed in discovering the desired object in the fields, he enters the forest and perches on some detached tree, tall enough to enable

him to see to a great distance around. His posture is now erect, he remains still and silent, moving only his head, as on all other occasions, to enable his keen eye to note the occurrences which may take place in his vicinity. The lively Squirrel is seen gaily leaping from one branch to another, or busily employed in searching for the fallen nuts on the ground. It has found one. Its bushy tail is beautifully curved along its back, the end of it falling off with a semicircular bend; its nimble feet are seen turning the nut quickly round, and its teeth are already engaged in perforating the hard shell; when, quick as thought, the Red-tailed Hawk, which has been watching it in all its motions, falls upon it, seizes it near the head, transfixes and strangles it, devours it on the spot, or ascends exultingly to a branch with the yet palpitating victim in his talons, and there feasts at leisure.

As soon as the little King-bird has raised its brood, and when its courage is no longer put in requisition for the defence of its young or its mate, the Red-tailed Hawk visits the farm-houses, to pay his regards to the poultry. This is done without much precaution, for, while sailing over the yard where the chickens, the ducklings, and the young turkeys are, the Hawk plunges upon any one of them, and sweeps it off to the nearest wood. When impelled by continued hunger, he now and then manages to elude the vigilance of the Martins, Swallows and King-birds, and watching for a good opportunity, falls upon and seizes an old fowl, the dying screams of which are heard by the farmer at the plough, who swears vengeance against the robber. He remembers that he has observed the Hawk's nest in the woods, and full of anger at the recollection of the depredations which the plunderer has already committed, and at the anticipation of its many visits during the winter, leaves his work and his horses, strides to his house, and with an axe and a rifle in his hands proceeds towards the tree, where the hopes of the Red-tailed Hawk are snugly nestled among the tall branches. The farmer arrives, eyes the gigantic tree, thinks for a moment of the labour which will be required for felling it, but resolves that he shall not be overreached by a Hawk. He throws aside his hat, rolls up his sleeves, and applies himself to the work. His brawny arms give such an impulse to the axe, that at every stroke large chips are seen to fall off on all sides. The poor mother-bird, well aware of the result, sails sorrowfully over and around. She would fain beg for mercy towards her young. She alights on the edge of the nest, and would urge her offspring to take flight. But the farmer has watched her motions. The axe is left sticking in the core of the tree, his rifle is raised to his shoulder in an instant, and the next moment the whizzing ball has pierced the heart of the Red-tailed Hawk, which falls unheeded to the earth. The farmer renews his work, and now changes sides. A whole hour has been spent in the application of ceaseless blows. He begins to look upwards,

to judge which way the giant of the forest will fall, and having ascertained this, he redoubles his blows. The huge oak begins to tremble. Were it permitted to speak, it might ask why it should suffer for the deeds of another; but it is now seen slowly to incline, and soon after with an awful rustling produced by all its broad arms, its branches, twigs and leaves, passing like lightning through the air, the noble tree falls to the earth, and almost causes it to shake. The work of revenge is now accomplished: the farmer seizes the younglings, and carries them home, to be tormented by his children, until death terminates their brief career.

Notwithstanding the very common occurrence of such acts of retribution between man and the Hawk, it would be difficult to visit a plantation in the State of Louisiana, without observing at least a pair of this species hovering about, more especially during the winter months. Early in February, they begin to build their nest, which is usually placed within the forest, and on the tallest and largest tree in the neighbourhood. The male and female are busily engaged in carrying up dried sticks, and other materials, for eight or ten days, during which time their cry is seldom heard. The nest is large, and is fixed in the centre of a triply forked branch. It is of a flattish form, constructed of sticks, and finished with slender twigs and coarse grasses or Spanish moss. The female lays four or five eggs, of a dull white colour, splashed with brown and black, with a very hard, smooth shell. The male assists the female in incubating, but it is seldom that the one brings food to the other while thus employed.

I have seen one or two of these nests built in a large tree which had been left standing in the middle of a field; but occurrences of this kind are rare, on account of the great enmity shewn to this species by the farmers. The young are abundantly supplied with food of various kinds, particularly grey squirrels, which the parents procure while hunting in pairs, when nothing can save the squirrel from their attacks excepting its retreat into the hole of a tree; for should the animal be observed ascending the trunk or branch of a tree by either of the Hawks, this one immediately plunges toward it, while the other watches it from the air. The little animal, if placed against the trunk, when it sees the Hawk coming towards it, makes swiftly for the opposite side of the trunk, but is there immediately dived at by the other Hawk, and now the murderous pair chase it so closely, that unless it immediately finds a hole into which to retreat, it is caught in a few minutes, killed, carried to the nest, torn in pieces, and distributed among the young Hawks. Small hares, or, as we usually call them, *rabbits*, are also frequently caught, and the depredations of the Red-tailed Hawks at this period are astonishing, for they seem to kill every thing, fit for food, that comes in their way. They are great destroyers of tame Pigeons, and woe to the Cock or Hen that

strays far from home, for so powerful is this Hawk, that it is able not only to kill them, but to carry them off in its claws to a considerable distance.

The continued attachment that exists between Eagles once paired, is not exhibited by these birds, which, after rearing their young, become as shy towards each other as if they had never met. This is carried to such a singular length, that they are seen to chase and rob each other of their prey, on all occasions. I have seen a couple thus engaged, when one of them had just seized a young rabbit or a squirrel, and was on the eve of rising in the air with it, for the purpose of carrying it off to a place of greater security. The one would attack the other with merciless fury, and either force it to abandon the prize, or fight with the same courage as its antagonist, to prevent the latter from becoming the sole possessor. They are sometimes observed flying either one after the other with great rapidity, emitting their continued cry of *kae*, or performing beautiful evolutions through the air, until one or other of them becomes fatigued, and giving way, makes for the earth, where the battle continues until one is overpowered and obliged to make off. It was after witnessing such an encounter between two of these powerful marauders, fighting hard for a young hare, that I made the drawing now before you, kind reader, in which you perceive the male to have greatly the advantage over the female, although she still holds the hare firmly in one of her talons, even while she is driven towards the earth, with her breast upwards.

I have observed that this species will even condescend to pounce on wood-rats and meadow-mice; but I never saw one of these birds seize even those without first alighting on a tree before committing the act.

During the winter months, the Red-tailed Hawk remains perched for hours together, when the sun is shining and the weather calm. Its breast is opposed to the sun, and it then is seen at a great distance, the pure white of that portion of its plumage glittering as if possessed of a silky gloss. They return to their roosting-places so late in the evening, that I have frequently heard their cry after sun-set, mingling with the jovial notes of Chuck-will's-widow, and the ludicrous laugh of the Barred Owl. In the State of Louisiana, the Red-tailed Hawk roosts amongst the tallest branches of the *Magnolia grandiflora*, a tree which there often attains a height of a hundred feet, and a diameter of from three to four feet at the base. It is also fond of roosting on the tall Cypress-trees of our swamps, where it spends the night in security, amidst the mosses attached to the branches.

The Red-tailed Hawk is extremely wary, and difficult to be approached by any one bearing a gun, the use of which it seems to understand perfectly; for no sooner does it perceive a man thus armed than it spreads its wings, utters a loud shriek, and sails off in an opposite direction. On the other hand, a person on horseback, or walking unarmed, may pass immediately

under the branch on which it is perched, when it merely watches his motions as he proceeds. It seldom alights on fences, or the low branches of trees, but prefers the highest and most prominent parts of the tallest trees. It alights on the borders of clear streams to drink. I have observed it in such situations, immersing its bill up to the eyes, and swallowing as much as was necessary to quench its thirst at a single draught.

I have seen this species pounce on soft-shelled tortoises, and amusing enough it was to see the latter scramble towards the water, enter it, and save themselves from the claws of the Hawk by immediately diving. I am not aware that this Hawk is ever successful in these attacks, as I have not on any occasion found any portion of the skin, head, or feet of tortoises in the stomachs of the many Hawks of this species which I have killed and examined. Several times, however, I have found portions of bull-frogs in their stomach.

All our Falcons are pestered with parasitic flying ticks. Those found amongst the plumage of the Red-tailed Hawk, like all others, move swiftly sidewise between the feathers, issue from the skin, and shift from one portion of the body to another on wing, and do not abandon the bird for a day or two after the latter is dead. These ticks are large, and of an auburn colour.

The body of the Red-tailed Hawk is large, compact, and muscular. These birds protrude their talons beyond their head in seizing their prey, as well as while fighting in the air, in the manner shown in the Plate. I have caught several birds of this species by baiting a steel-trap with a live chicken.

I have only here to add, that amongst the American farmers the common name of our present bird is the *Hen-hawk*, while it receives that of *Grand mangeur de poules* from the Creoles of Louisiana.

RED-TAILED HAWK, *Falco borealis*, Wils. Am. Orn., vol. vi. p. 76. Adult.

AMERICAN BUZZARD OR WHITE-BREASTED HAWK, *Falco leverianus*, Wils. Am. Orn., vol. vi. p. 78.

BUTEO BOREALIS, RED-TAILED BUZZARD, Swains. & Rich., F. Bor. Amer., vol. ii. p. 50.

RED-TAILED HAWK OR BUZZARD, *Falco borealis*, Nutt. Man., vol. i. p. 102.

RED-TAILED HAWK, *Falco borealis*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. i. p. 265; vol. v. p. 378.

Adult Male.

Bill light blue, blackish at the tip, greenish-yellow on the margin towards the base; cere greenish-yellow. Iris hazel. Tarsi and toes yellow; claws brownish-black. Upper part of the head light brownish-grey. Loral space and under eyelid white. A broad band of dark brown from the angle of the mouth backwards. Neck above and on the sides reddish-yellow, with large deep brown spots. Back deep brown; scapulars of the same colour, broadly margined and tipped with brownish-white. Lesser wing-coverts chocolate-

brown; larger lighter brown, tipped with white. Primary quills blackish-brown; secondaries lighter, tipped with brownish-white; all barred with blackish. Upper tail-coverts whitish, barred with brown, and yellowish-red in the middle. Tail bright yellowish-red, tipped with whitish, and having a narrow bar of black near the end. Lower parts brownish-white; the fore part of the breast and neck light yellowish-red, the former marked with guttiform, somewhat sagittate brown spots: abdomen and chin white; feathers of the leg and tarsus pale reddish-yellow, those on the outside indistinctly spotted.

Length $20\frac{1}{2}$ inches; extent of wings 46; bill along the back $1\frac{1}{4}$, along the gap 2; tarsus $3\frac{1}{3}$, middle toe $2\frac{3}{4}$. Wings when closed reaching to within two inches of the tip of the tail.

Adult Female.

The female, which is considerably larger, agrees with the male in the general distribution of its colouring. The upper parts are darker, and the under parts nearly white, there being only a few narrow streaks on the sides of the breast; the tibial and tarsal feathers as in the male. The tail is of a duller red, and wants the black bar.

Length 24 inches.

HARLAN'S BUZZARD.

†BUTEO HARLANI, *Aud.*

PLATE VIII.—MALE AND FEMALE.

Long before I discovered this fine Hawk, I was anxious to have an opportunity of honouring some new species of the feathered tribe with the name of my excellent friend Dr. RICHARD HARLAN, of Philadelphia. This I might have done sooner, had I not waited until a species should occur, which in its size and importance should bear some proportion to my gratitude toward that learned and accomplished friend.

The Hawks now before you were discovered near St. Francisville, in Louisiana, during my late sojourn in that State, and had bred in the neighbourhood of the place where I procured them, for two seasons, although they had always eluded my search, until, at last, as I was crossing a large cotton field, one afternoon, I saw the female represented in the Plate standing



Red-tailed Buzzard.



Audubon, John James. 1840. "The Red-tailed Buzzard, *Buteo borealis*, Gmel. [Pl. 7]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 1, 32–38. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319120>.

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