

# Liberty Wildlife Rehabilitation Foundation



Liberty Wildlife

## Education Program's Natural History

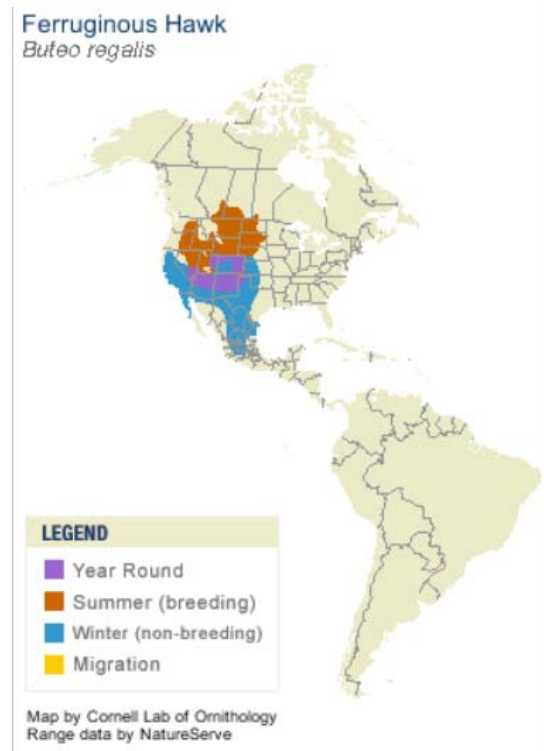


**FERRUGINOUS  
HAWK**



## Ferruginous Hawk (*Buteo regalis*)

**Range:** The Ferruginous Hawk will be found mostly in the western half of North America in the Great Basin and Great Plains from southwestern Canada, through western United States to northern Mexico. There is no record of this species being found outside the Americas. The Northern populations in Washington, Montana, North Dakota, Alberta, and Saskatchewan are completely migratory. The usual wintering areas are California, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and into Mexico. Almost nothing is known about migration of individuals in southern breeding locations; they appear to migrate short distances or to be sedentary.



**Habitat:** The habitat of the Ferruginous Hawk is open grass and shrub lands and deserts with scattered trees, rocky mounds, or outcrops and shallow canyons that overlook open valleys. They prefer open, level or rolling prairies or foothills. They avoid forests and high elevations.

**Description:** The Ferruginous Hawk is the largest and heaviest Buteo. It measures from 22 to 26 inches in length with a 4- to 5-foot wingspan. It can weigh from 2¼ to 4½ pounds. As with most other raptors, the female will be at the larger range of these measurements, sometimes up to one-and-a-half times larger than the male. The sexes are similar in plumage. Adults have a rusty color on their back and shoulders, which extends downward onto the legs. The under-part is a whitish color spotted with rufous. A view of the bird in flight will show that the leg feathers form a V shape against the belly of the hawk. They have a large head and wide gap, equal almost to that of an eagle. Their legs are feathered to the toes. Typically they will be found singly or in pairs, but may gather in small groups around abundant food source, such as prairie-dog towns. Two color morphs (light and dark) exist in this species with light morphs being most numerous. The dark morphs can be found throughout the range and will vary in frequency from 0–10%.





Juvenile dark morph



Juvenile light morph



Adult light morph



Adult dark morph

**Hunting/Prey:** Common prey foods of Ferruginous Hawks are rabbits, ground squirrels, and prairie dogs, but they will also sometimes hunt birds, snakes, lizards, grasshoppers, and crickets. They often employ a “sit-and-wait” hunting technique, and groups of 5 to 10 birds will perch in and around prairie-dog towns. In this ground perching technique, a hawk will stand on the ground at a rodent burrow after initially locating it from the air. As the burrowing animal reaches the surface, the hawk rises into the air and pounces upon it even while it is still underneath the loose earth. Other hunt techniques include hunting from a perch, hovering, low or high searching flight. When searching the terrain for food, these hawks hover at times like Rough-legged Hawk. They tend to hunt in early morning or late afternoon. Populations and the reproduction of this hawk can fluctuate with the availability of prey.

**Breeding/Nesting:** Ferruginous Hawks build large nests of sticks, grasses, old bones, or cow or horse dung on hillsides, rock pinnacles, trees or power poles. They will also build a nest on the ground. They have been found to nest in 17 states in the United States and 3 provinces in Canada. Both the male and female participate in nest building, followed by the laying and incubation of an average of 3 or 4 eggs that are laid at two-day intervals. The young hatch between February and July after about 28 days of incubation, and leave the nest 38 to 50 days later. The adults continue to feed the fledged young as well as the nestlings. The young remain with their parents for several weeks after fledging before dispersing on their own. They are mature at 2 years.





Nevada nest sites

**Lifespan:** The average life expectancy of Ferruginous Hawks has been estimated to be up to 12 years in the wild and twice as long in captivity. The maximum longevity record for Ferruginous Hawks is 14 years, 11 months. (University of Michigan Museum of Zoology)

**Threats:** The populations of Ferruginous Hawks seem to have decreased in most areas except California. Some of the main threats are: lost of habitat and range due to cultivation of native prairie grassland and urban and gas and oil development, electrocution, disturbance of the nesting area, illegal shooting and trapping and predation by Great Horned Owls and ravens,. While not on the endangered species list they are considered a species of special concern by U.S. Fish and Wildlife due to habitat loss and sensitivity to prey reduction. They are listed as threatened in Canada. It has been observed that the Arizona population has been shrinking due to human activity and urban sprawl.

#### **Other Ferruginous Hawk Facts:**

- The scientific name, *Buteo regalis*, is derived from the Latin word *buteo*, which indicates a soaring falcon or hawk, and *regalis*, a Latin word for royal or regal and probably refers to the large size of the bird.
- The common name "Ferruginous" is derived from the Latin *Ferrugo*, meaning, "rust", which is the predominant color of this hawk.
- The Ferruginous Hawk also has been known as Eagle Hawk, Gopher Hawk, Ferruginous Rough-legged Hawk, and Squirrel Hawk.
- Before the elimination of bison in the West, nests of the Ferruginous Hawk were often partially constructed of bison bones and wool.
- The Rough-legged Hawk, the Ferruginous Hawk, and the Golden Eagle are the only American hawks to have legs feathered all the way to the toes.
- Although this species soars well, it maintains faster flight than other North American Buteos.
- In flight, these birds soar with their wings in a dihedral.
- The Ferruginous Hawk is the largest hawk in North America and is often mistaken for an eagle due to its size, proportions, and behavior.
- In 1937, A. C. Bent's offered this apt description of the Ferruginous Hawk, a "splendid hawk, the largest, most powerful, and grandest of our buteos, a truly regal bird. One who knows it in life cannot help being impressed with its close relationship to the Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), which is not much more than a glorified buteo. Both species have feathered tarsi, both build huge nests on cliffs and in trees, and both lay eggs that are very similar except in size; food habits, flight, behavior, and voice of the two are much alike.







*Pawnee*

Pawnee was transferred to Liberty Wildlife from the World Bird Sanctuary in Missouri in 2004 as an imprint and already trained for doing education. We estimate that he was a year old when he arrived.

Sources: *Raptors of Western North America* by Brian Wheeler, The Peregrine Fund, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, University of Minnesota Raptor Center, Carolina Raptor Center, University of Michigan Museum of Zoology

