

## *Buteo albicaudatus* (White-tailed Hawk)

Family: Accipitridae (Hawks, Kites and Eagles)

Order: Falconiformes (Diurnal Birds of Prey)

Class: Aves (Birds)



**Fig. 1.** White-tailed hawk, *Buteo albicaudatus*.

[[http://antpitta.com/images/photos/hawks/gallery\\_hawks2.htm](http://antpitta.com/images/photos/hawks/gallery_hawks2.htm) downloaded 6 November 2012]

**TRAITS.** *Buteo albicaudatus* is a huge, short and muscular hawk. It has a wingspan of 118-143 cm, and a total length of 44-60 cm can be attained along with a reported body mass of 880-1240 g. Adult birds are grey at the top and white below and on the rump, with a faint pale rufous or grey occurring. The wings are dark above, mixed with grey. It has a short white tail with a narrow black band near the end that is apparent during flight. A distinctive feature of the bird when it is sitting with closed wings is a conspicuous rusty- red shoulder patch. It has a whitish underwing, with indistinct brownish barring on the underwing cover that extends onto the flanks

and thighs. The cere is pale green, has a hazel iris and the beak is black with a horn-colored base and lastly, it has yellow feet with black talons.

**ECOLOGY.** *Buteo albicaudatus* can be found anywhere from the coast of Texas and the Rio Grande Valley to central Argentina as well as many southerly Caribbean islands. It prefers an open or semi open habitat with regions up to 2,000ft above sea level, with a minimal number of trees to hinder its flight. Though some populations will make regional movements when food is limited it isn't a migratory bird. It prefers to perch on telephone poles, trees, bushes as well as to soar. Basically, it prefers arid habitats and rarely is found in rainy locales. Its favored hunting technique is to hover and analyze the environment for signals of potential prey. The diet of the white-tailed hawk depends on the environment it is in for example, in the West Indies, lizards of 12 in or more are the preferred prey whereas in southern Texas it is rabbits. Other animals for example, snakes, arthropods, smallish birds e.g. quail and passerines along with chickens and marmosets are preyed upon.

**SOCIAL ACTIVITY.** *Buteo albicaudatus* is normally found in the proximity of grass fires by patrolling the advancing edges of the flames looking for fleeing prey (Brown, 1968). Individuals as many as twenty to thirty or more may gather at a natural or controlled burn (along with caracara, Swainson's Hawks and Aplomado Falcon) and even a day or more after the area is burnt, the birds may continue to work that area. Adults are found in pairs except in times of fire but normally young and adults remain together until January or February. During mating season, sometimes nonbreeding subadults gather in small groups.

**FORAGING BEHAVIOUR.** In Trinidad, *Buteo albicaudatus* is found perched on trees, telephone poles or even upon the ground. It spends the majority of its time soaring and prefers to hunt in open hillsides, at least 2,000 feet. In favorable winds, *Buteo albicaudatus* tends to hover while hunting (Brown, 1968). Normally it will pause in one spot for some time, either 'sitting on updraughts' or with motionless wings or waving the broad wings in a short arc, like as though shoulder shrugging. The process will be repeated by gliding again for some distance and pulling up into the wind again if nothing materializes. This type of hunting is suitable to dry grassy hillsides. So when the prey is sighted, the hawk will scoop in and grab it with its talons and squeeze and puncture the organs of the organism and carry it back to the nest (Brown, 1968). White-tailed Hawk feed normally on whatever is conveniently present but they prey on immatures of various taxa in the nesting season. They are normally prey selective but not during the times of supplying for the nestlings. White-tailed hawks are known to exhibit kleptoparasitism which is the form of feeding where one animal steals or preys on food that is already caught, collected or prepared by another. White-tailed hawks will attack black-shouldered kites that have prey and when the bird drops the prey to defend itself, afterwards the hawks will be seen searching for the prey. The white-tailed hawk normally uses one of two hunting techniques. They scan for prey while in flight, either by catching a small bird in flight or chasing the prey along the earth surface. Also they watch for activity from elevated perch sites then swoop down and pin them in their talons.

**COMMUNICATION.** The call is a high laughing series with the introductory note more protracted, then more hurried notes in a series. A high-pitched cackling, which sounds like the syllable 'ke' repeated. It is usually silent but has a tinkling sound that has compared to the call of a laughing gull or to the bleating of a goat (Brown, 1968). The white-tailed hawk exhibits alarm calls. These loud vocalizations are done in relation to potential harm and danger for example

when intruded by food competitors, mates, humans or nest predators. In Falconiformes, alarm or territorial calls normally are known as their typical calls and are considered as those which identify species (Brown and Amadon 1968). *Buteo albicaudatus* of both sexes release alarm calls year round, without associated seasonal call variation or aggressive behavior. So depending on the frequency and the lengths of the different notes, each has a particular meaning e.g. a quick, short note signals danger.

**SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR.** At around two years of age, the white-tailed hawk reaches sexual maturity. It is monogamous, which basically means it has the same mate for several years and the nesting territory will be continuously used by the pair over the years. Only in the cases where the original mate dies then it will accept a new mate. Aerial displays are performed by the males by steeply diving and shooting up again. After several times of repeating this display, the male grasp her talons momentarily with his own talons. Normally a courtship flight last for 10 minutes or more even if copulation may occur without courtship flights (Bent, 1937). During copulation, the perched female tilts forward which allows the male to descend with his feet wedged on her back in a horizontally position. The female moves and twists her tail feathers to a lateral angle, while the lodged male angles his cloacal opening towards the female's cloaca. The copulation process normally occurs for 5-10 seconds and normally occurs several times a day during January or February (Reilly, 1968).

This *Buteo* constructs a relatively large nest of freshly broken thorny twigs intertwined with bunches of finer materials and dry grass, which also comprises of green sprays of other plants and mesquite. Every year the nest is added to and becomes larger, sometimes almost three feet wide. Usually the nest is 5-15 feet from the ground with a slight ridge so they will be able to view in every direction. When the nest is invaded, the pair may hover or soar high above, sometimes silent or screaming or attack (Brown, 1968). Usually two eggs are laid but infrequently one or three. Approximately one-third is unmarked white while the other 2/3 is spotted with lavender or brown. In Trinidad eggs are laid in March and April (Brown, 1968). Incubation normally occurs for 28 days normally by the female whereas food is brought to the nest by the male. Once hatched, the white tailed hawk chicks are brooded for seven days by the mother, afterwards both parents leave the hen to hunt to provide food for the voracious young chicks. Normally the age of the first flight is between 4-5 weeks and after the birds have learnt to fly, they keep close to the parents for another 6-7 weeks until they can adequately forage for themselves.

**JUVENILE BEHAVIOUR.** In the case where there are three chicks, the two larger ones are normally the more aggressive and get the food more frequently from the parents however the smaller chick hardly gets so in turn it dies and it is fed to the other two chicks (Brown, 1968). Also when the chick is threatened, it normally extends its wings and talons to look much larger than it is so as to fend off potential predators. At early ages of 10-12 days, the chicks start to peer more frequently towards the sky and releases more frequent calls. The young nestling has two notes: a sucking *tsick* note and a cat-like 'mee-ow'. At 12 days old, the young nestling can be seen moving awkwardly to the side of the nest, turn and void over the edge.

**ANTIPREDATOR BEHAVIOUR.** Very little information has been published about anti predator behaviour of this species. Since it is a predator, the only aspect of the white tailed hawk that maybe preyed upon is the young chicks. When the nest is invaded, the pair may hover or soar high above, sometimes silent or screaming or either attack (Brown, 1968).

**REFERENCES**

- Bent, A. C. (1937). Life histories of North American birds of prey, part 1, U.S. Natl. Mus.Bull. 167; 216-221.  
Brown, L & Amadon, D. (1968). Eagles, Hawks and Falcons of the World, Volume 2, pg 592- 596.  
Reilly, E.M. (1968). The Audubon Illustrated handbook of American Birds, pgs 98-101.

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Posted online: 2012



**Fig. 2.** White-tailed hawk about to attack prey.

[<http://life-birding-etc.blogspot.com/2010/01/birding-at-landfill.html>, downloaded 6 November 2012]



**Fig. 3.** White-tailed hawk hovering in an updraught.

[<http://www.andeanbirding.com/html/gallery.html>, downloaded 6 November 2012]

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