**Buteo swainsoni** (Swainson’s Hawk)

Family: Accipitridae (Hawks, Kites and Eagles)
Order: Falconiformes (Diurnal Birds of Prey)
Class: Aves (Birds)

![Swainson’s Hawk, Buteo swainsoni](http://www.onthewingphotography.com/wings/2016/05/25/warning-swainsons-hawks-ahead/downloaded 26 February 2017)

**Fig. 1.** Swainson’s Hawk, *Buteo swainsoni*

**TRAITS.** *Buteo swainsoni* has a characteristic reddish-brown bib across the neck and upper chest. Their feet are four-toed with sharp talons, and they have a short, hooked beak to pierce and tear flesh. The breast is light and cream-coloured and the underside has reddish-brown spots. The head, back and wings are dark brown in colour. There is a colour contrast with their underwings having white wing linings and their flight feathers being dark brown to black. They also have a distinguishable white chin (Fig. 1). Males have grey heads whilst females have brown heads. The hawk is approximately 48-56 cm in length. The wingspan is 122-137 cm and the weight is approximately 0.69-1.37 kg (The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 2010).

**DISTRIBUTION.** Swainson’s hawk geographic range is large as they are wide ranging and immensely mobile (Fig. 2). The hawk is a rare visitor to countries such as Trinidad and Tobago,
Chile and the Dominican Republic (IUCN, 2016). They are commonly seen when migrating from North America to South America from August to October. Their passage is mostly inland but sometimes coastal, for example through Central America (Fuller et al., 1998).

**HABITAT AND ACTIVITY.** Swainson’s hawk has a large and variable home range, depending on nesting habitat and the quality of foraging habitat and the presence of prey within that habitat (Woodbridge, 1998). Swainson’s hawk breeds in the open country, grasslands, woodlands and even cultivated lands (Smith et al., 1986). The hawks carry out all activities during the day. Their nest is composed of leaves, grass, weeds, large sticks and lined with bark from trees which are often found in riparian zones (the areas bordering bodies of water).

**FOOD AND FEEDING.** *Buteo swainsoni* feeds on small rodents (Fig. 3) on moister grasslands that are present close to thickets (dense group of bushes or trees) where they nest (Smith and Murphy, 1973). In Brazil, the hawk is mostly insectivorous, hunting grasshoppers. In Colorado, there were reports of the hawk feeding on swimming spadefoot toads. They also tend to feed on birds, rabbits, mice, gophers, fish, lizards, salamanders, small mammals and occasionally snakes (The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 2010). The hawk hunts from perches such as utility lines or fences. The hawk is also seen near areas that are being cleared by tractors or areas hit with a forest fire (recently disturbed lands) (Jones & Stokes, 2006). They are also skilled in capturing and eating insects whilst mid-air. The hawks feed their young on rodents, reptiles and rabbits (The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 2010). The hawk hunts from perches such as utility lines or fences. The hawk is also seen near areas that are being cleared by tractors or areas hit with a forest fire (recently disturbed lands) (Jones & Stokes, 2006). They are also skilled in capturing and eating insects whilst mid-air. The hawks feed their young on rodents, reptiles and rabbits.

**POPULATION ECOLOGY.** Swainson’s hawk are not known to have predators. They are strong, vicious and territorial birds. Swainson’s hawk is considered to have longevity about 15-20 years. They are faithful to a breeding site that has all the resources they require and given that all conditions are suitable along with an abundance of prey, the hawks are fully capable of producing offspring every year (Woodbridge, 1998).

**REPRODUCTION.** For successful reproduction, Swainson’s hawk requires a large open field for hunting, an abundant food source and a favourable nesting site (Vinzant, 1990). When a suitable environment is established, the hawk initiates their nesting rituals. Their clutch size is 1-4 eggs that are bluish white or dull white in colour spotted with light brown dots. The female incubates the eggs for an estimated 35 days during which, the male will bring food for the mother. The young are unable to fly until 42-44 days after hatching and may remain with the parents until migrating (Fig. 4) (Global Raptors, 2011).

**BEHAVIOUR.** Their means of attack and defence are their beaks and talons. When scavenging, they can hover or kite while looking for food (The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 2010). They sometimes hunt in groups and may target prey by foot. They scan the land and can run after insects and small rodents with their wings partly outstretched. The males court females by instigated a “sky dance” where the male will perform sharp dives and quick recoveries to impress the female. Birds during breeding are cautious and aggressive with their nest to protect their young. During migration, they head south towards Central America where for two weeks they funnel through the Panama Canal (Fuller et al., 1998). The birds usually feed and migrate in large numbers however it should be noted that they migrate together due to favourable weather conditions and less for social interaction (Global Raptors, 2011). When migrating, they utilize gravity to perform most of the work as it closes tail and folds the primary feathers inwards (The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 2010). Generally, this species flight mechanism is soaring flight (Fuller et al., 1998).
**APPLIED ECOLOGY.** As assessed by the IUCN, this species is of Least Concern. Swainson’s hawk has a large range and a stable population thus it does not near the threshold for vulnerability (IUCN, 2016). In addition, predators are limited, they are large creatures that can efficiently provide for themselves and their young and are becoming more familiar with human interactions and territories.

**REFERENCES**


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**Fig. 2.** Swainson’s hawk geographic distribution.

Fig. 3. Swainson’s hawk eating a gopher.


Fig. 4. Swainson’s hawk looking over her young.

[http://www.royalalbertamuseum.ca/exhibits/online/eggs/_images/_bird/swnhk.jpg downloaded 26 February 2017]

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