

Buteogallus aequinoctialis (Rufous Crab-hawk)

Family: Accipitridae (Hawks, Kites and Eagles)

Order: Falconiformes (Diurnal Birds of Prey)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Rufous crab-hawk, *Buteogallus aequinoctialis*.

[<http://jonathanhornbuckle.webs.com/apps/photos/photo?photoid=140900859>, downloaded 4 March 2017]

TRAITS. The rufous crab-hawk is dark brown with a rufous (reddish) belly and yellow feet (HBW, 2017), where the rufous edging extends to the wings and back (Fig. 1), with an inconspicuous short black tail with a narrow white band in the middle and a narrow white tip (IUCN, 2016). Its head, throat and neck are black while the primaries and secondaries of the wing are dark brown. The eyes are also dark brown, with a yellow cere and lore (the skin between eye, nostril and beak). The curved beak has a white base but is mainly black. The body of the crab-hawk is approximately 42-47cm long, whereas its wingspan is 90-106cm. The females tend to be much larger than the males, weighing 725-945g as opposed to 506-665g (HBW, 2017).

DISTRIBUTION. The rufous crab-hawk can be found from the Orinoco Delta, east Venezuela, along the northeast South American coast through Suriname, Guyana, and French Guiana to south Brazil (Fig. 2). It is a rare visitor to Trinidad (IUCN, 2016).

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. Found in moist lowland forest of subtropical or tropical regions such as mangrove forests, wet savannas, river edges and swampy coastal vegetated areas, but predominantly found in mangroves and swamp regions (HBW, 2017). The rufous crab-hawk is usually perched at low to medium heights (Fig. 3), and also often circles in order to target prey from above. It is mostly active during the day (Tsang, 2016).

FOOD AND FEEDING. The crab-hawk can be considered a dietary specialist, as it is documented to feed mostly on crabs e.g. *Ucides* and *Callinectes* (HWW, 2017). They hunt by sitting on low branches over the swampy coastal vegetation then swoop down into the swampland, where it uses its talons to snatch up a crab and carry it off to a dry perch to feed (GlobalRaptors, 2009).

POPULATION ECOLOGY. The rufous crab-hawk is generally seen in pairs. The global population is essentially unknown, however, it was last estimated to be in the thousands assuming that one pair would be found for every kilometre and this was over a linear distribution of approximately 6,000km (IUCN, 2016). Generally throughout the year, the rufous crab-hawk does not leave the coastal areas as it serves as their main source of food.

REPRODUCTION. The crab-hawk nests throughout the year, in Suriname from February to August which is the rainy season, and in southeast Brazil from September onwards. Like most hawks they use twig nests lined with leaves, about 15-25m above the water. The minimum number of eggs produced is one but sadly the maximum is only two eggs in the clutch (Planet Of Birds, 2011).

APPLIED ECOLOGY. This species is listed as Nearly Threatened because it is currently experiencing a moderately rapid population decline as a result of deforestation causing the loss of their mangrove habitat, which supports their mostly exclusive diet of crabs. Therefore there is cause for concern in regard to the survival of the species (IUCN, 2016). The primary threat to the species is accelerating deforestation where it is expected to lose well over 50% of its natural habitat. This species' habitat is found in permanent protected areas, however it can still be exploited through loopholes in the legislation.

REFERENCES

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Author: Jelani George

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Fig. 2. Rufous crab-hawk geographic distribution.

[<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/22695808/0>, downloaded 7 March 2017]



Fig. 3. Rufous crab-hawk perched.

[https://www.flickr.com/photos/michel_giraud-audine/5730831601/, downloaded 7 March 2017]