

FIRST VERIFIABLE RECORDS OF THE ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK IN FLORIDA

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Prior to 2000, the status of the Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*) in Florida was uncertain. Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) placed it on their list of unverified species as “ostensibly a rare, occasional to irregular winter visitor.” Stevenson and Anderson (1994) called it a “very rare, irregular winter visitor to Florida, with at least 24 reports by credible observers.” Reports of Rough-legged Hawks in Florida date back to 1937 (Sprunt 1940), and more than 60 reports had accumulated by 1991 (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). However, despite the large number of reports in the state, verifiable evidence in the form of specimens, photographs, or videotapes was lacking, and some reports undoubtedly were incorrect (e.g., the pair that nested and raised two young [!] on an island in Lake Okeechobee; Sprunt 1940). All five Rough-legged Hawk reports that were submitted to the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee (FOSRC) between 1981 and 2001 were rejected (FOSRC records *vide* A. Kratter in litt.). Here, we describe the first documented occurrences of Rough-legged Hawks in Florida based on three individuals photographed at Lake Apopka North Shore Restoration Area (LANSRA) in Orange County during 2000.

OBSERVATIONS

While conducting his twice- or thrice-weekly bird surveys at LANSRA, Robinson observed a first-winter dark-morph Rough-legged Hawk in the southeastern corner of the restoration area on 16 February 2000 (see Pranty et al. 2002 for a description of the property). The following day, Radamaker photographed a light-morph Rough-legged Hawk at the same location. It eventually was determined that there were three first-winter Rough-legged Hawks at LANSRA during this period: one light morph and two dark morphs. All three Rough-legged Hawks were observed through 11 April 2000, and two (the light morph and one dark morph) lingered to 19 April 2000 (Pranty 2000a, b; Robinson, pers. obs.).

The light morph was readily identifiable by plumage characters such as the large black carpal patches that contrasted with mostly light underwings, the solid dark belly band, the wide dusky subterminal tail band, and the broad white uppertail coverts. The identification of the two dark morphs was complicated by the presence of other dark-morph *Buteos* at LANSRA during the same period, including two Red-tailed Hawks (*B. jamaicensis*) and one Swainson's Hawk (*B. swainsoni*). The dark-morph Rough-legged Hawks were studied at length and were identified using a combination of plumage and morphological characteristics such as the smallish bills and feet, black-tipped white underwing flight feathers, feathered tarsi, and the habit of perching on thin branches of shrubs (Bechard and Swem 2002). Among North American *Buteos*, feathered tarsi are shared only with the Ferruginous Hawk (*B. regalis*), which lacks a bold black subterminal tail band in all plumages.

Rademaker, Weatherman, and others took photographs of the LANSRA Rough-legged Hawks and submitted them to the FOSRC with detailed descriptions of all three individuals (logged separately as FOSRC 00-415, 00-416, and 00-418). The FOSRC accepted each observation as representing one of the first three verifiable records of the Rough-legged Hawk in Florida (Bowman 2000). Although the photographs taken of the birds show field marks diagnostic of Rough-legged Hawks, none of the photographs is of sufficient quality to be published here.

DISCUSSION

The three Rough-legged Hawks found at LANSRA during early 2000 corresponded with a substantial movement of the species into much of the eastern United States between late winter and mid-spring. The Hudson-Delaware region witnessed the “largest invasion . . . in perhaps a decade,” and in New York on 27 February 2000, 128 Rough-legged Hawks were seen at Braddock Bay and 121 others were observed at Derby (Burgeil et al. 2000: 159). The raptor season was “superb” in the Middle Atlantic Coast region, with at least 20 Rough-legged Hawk reports in Virginia (Iliff 2000: 164), and Appalachia recorded its “best numbers . . . in several years,” with more than 80 reported (Leberman 2000: 178). Rough-legged Hawks were found in “a record 56 counties in Minnesota, while Michigan also had an above-average number” during winter (Granlund 2000a: 181), and a record number of Rough-legged Hawks—**2600**—was noted at Whitefish Point, Michigan during spring, with 525 birds tallied there on 23 April 2000 (Granlund 2000b).

Rough-legged Hawks winter regularly south to Arkansas, Tennessee, and Virginia, and occur casually to the Gulf coast, with at least one verifiable record from Georgia (AOU 1998, Bechard and Swem 2002, Beaton et al. 2003). There have been several subsequent reports of Rough-legged Hawks in Florida following the LANSRA records of 2000, but none is supported by verifiable evidence. However, a report of one light morph at LANSRA 21 December 2005 (FOSRC 06-603) was accepted by the FOSRC (A. Kratter in litt.). Thus, the three Rough-legged Hawks recorded at Lake Apopka North Shore Restoration Area during February–April 2000 represent the first and only verifiable records obtained in Florida.

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