



## The Practiced Eye

by Kenn Kaufman  
photographs from VIREO

### Buteos of the winter fields

SOME BIRDS SEEM ESPECIALLY appropriate to the landscapes in which they live. Seen soaring over a lonely open field in winter, a hawk of the genus *Buteo* seems like one such perfect fit. Actually, some of our Buteos—such as Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*) and Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*)—are woodland birds. And one of the most typical grassland representatives, Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsonii*), is long gone from most of North America by the time winter settles in (with good reason: large insects, a staple in its diet, are tough to find in cold weather).

But three species remain that are characteristic of open country in winter: Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*), and Ferruginous Hawk (*Buteo regalis*). All three of these are good-sized Buteos of roughly similar proportions. All three are subject to much variation in plumage. And as a result, all three can cause problems for birders.

Identification of this trio became more manageable in 1987 with publication of *A Field Guide to Hawks*, featuring paintings by Brian K. Wheeler and text by William S. Clark. This was the first book to sort out all the variation and point out the consistent field marks for these birds. Brian Wheeler, the artist, is also an accomplished photographer; he has contributed many hawk photos to VIREO, including several in this *Practiced Eye*. As a result, we are able to present a sampling of the plumages of

these variable birds. In this season's column, most of the notes on field marks are in the photo captions, not in the main text, but these discussions do not cover every last detail; for a thorough treatment, readers are referred to the *Field Guide to Hawks*.

Widespread and common, the Red-tailed Hawk is well-known to birders all over the continent. This familiarity can breed perplexity for observers when they travel: many a seasoned birder has been thrown off by the variations in this "familiar" bird on unfamiliar territory. Actually, birders in the East may be lulled into a false sense of complacency, because Red-taileds there all look just about the same. West of the Mississippi, chaos breaks loose: there the Red-taileds range from whitish to rufous to chocolate to black, with every possible shade in between. Photos in this column show some of the variations, and the captions note some of the more useful field marks. But a good rule is that an odd-looking open-country Buteo is likely to be a Red-tailed until proven otherwise.

It sounds self-contradictory to say it, but Rough-legged Hawk is one of our most *consistently variable* birds. Adult females, adult males, and immatures all typically have different plumage patterns, and all occur in both light and dark morphs with a lot of individual variation. Thus, six or more different plumages can be expected anywhere that the Rough-legged occurs. Despite its variability, this hawk is usually easy to recognize with a little practice. The photos here show some of the common plumages.

Compared to Red-tailed Hawk, the Rough-legged usually looks less bulky in flight, with narrower wings and a slightly longer tail (the tail is often widely fanned, making its *length* harder to judge.) Its head is relatively small and rounded, especially compared to that of Ferruginous Hawk.

The Rough-legged soars and glides with the wings held perceptibly above horizontal, and it hovers (on rapidly beating wings) more often than most Buteos.

The Ferruginous Hawk is a large Buteo, as suggested by its specific



Portrait of a Red-tailed Hawk. Photograph/Arthur Morris/VIREO (m17/1/023)

name of *regalis*. Found mostly from the Great Plains westward, it has been recorded rarely as far east as Florida. Birders lacking experience with the Ferruginous might mistake it for either Red-tailed or Rough-legged hawks, but it has many distinctive characters of shape and plumage, as indicated in the photo captions here. The Ferruginous Hawk soars with its wings held noticeably above horizontal.

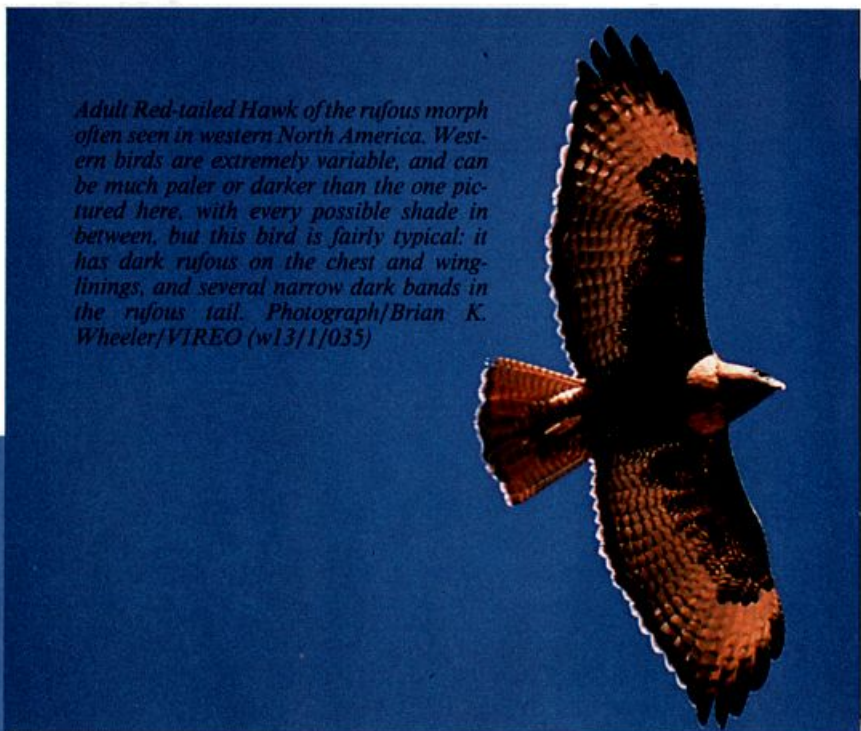
Adult Red-tailed Hawk overhead. This is the standard plumage pattern shown by the overwhelming majority of adults in the East (similar patterns occur on adults in the West). The "belly-band" of dark streaks is typical of most light-morph Red-taileds except for the "Kriders" variant on the Great Plains (which is very pale overall) and the "Fuertes" race of the Southwest (which is dark above but has mostly unmarked white underparts). A more consistent field mark is the dark patagial mark on the leading edge of the inner part of the wing, between the body and the wrist; the patagial mark is quite evident on the pictured bird. Photograph/Frank K. Schleicher/VIREO (s19/23/001)



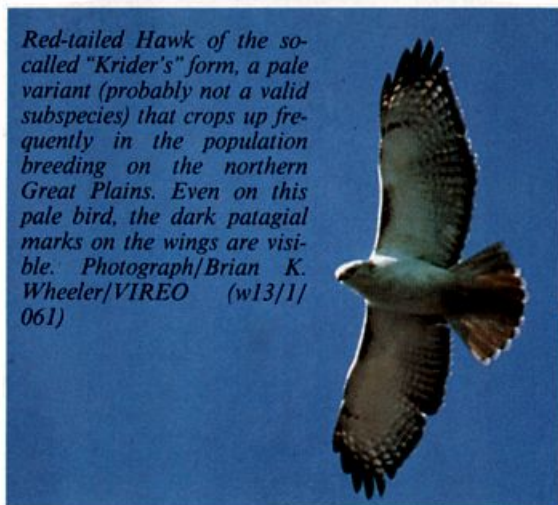
Immature Red-tailed Hawk seen from the upperside, to show the narrowly-banded brown tail on this age group. Notice the bird's shape: immature Red-taileds have slightly longer tails and narrower wings than adults. Photograph/Frank K. Schleicher/VIREO (s19/9/005)

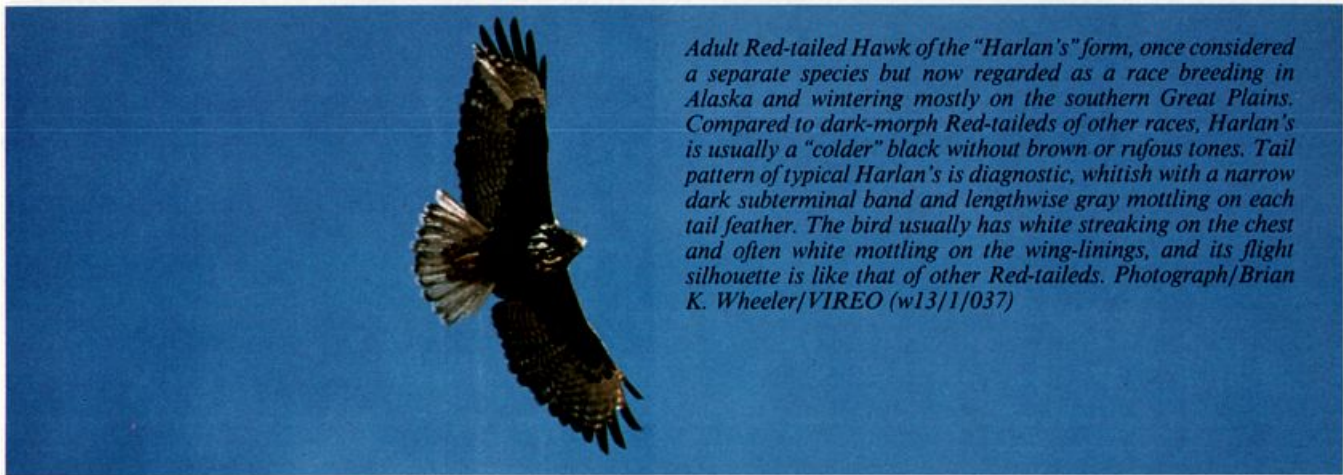


Adult Red-tailed Hawk of the rufous morph often seen in western North America. Western birds are extremely variable, and can be much paler or darker than the one pictured here, with every possible shade in between, but this bird is fairly typical: it has dark rufous on the chest and wing-linings, and several narrow dark bands in the rufous tail. Photograph/Brian K. Wheeler/VIREO (w13/1/035)

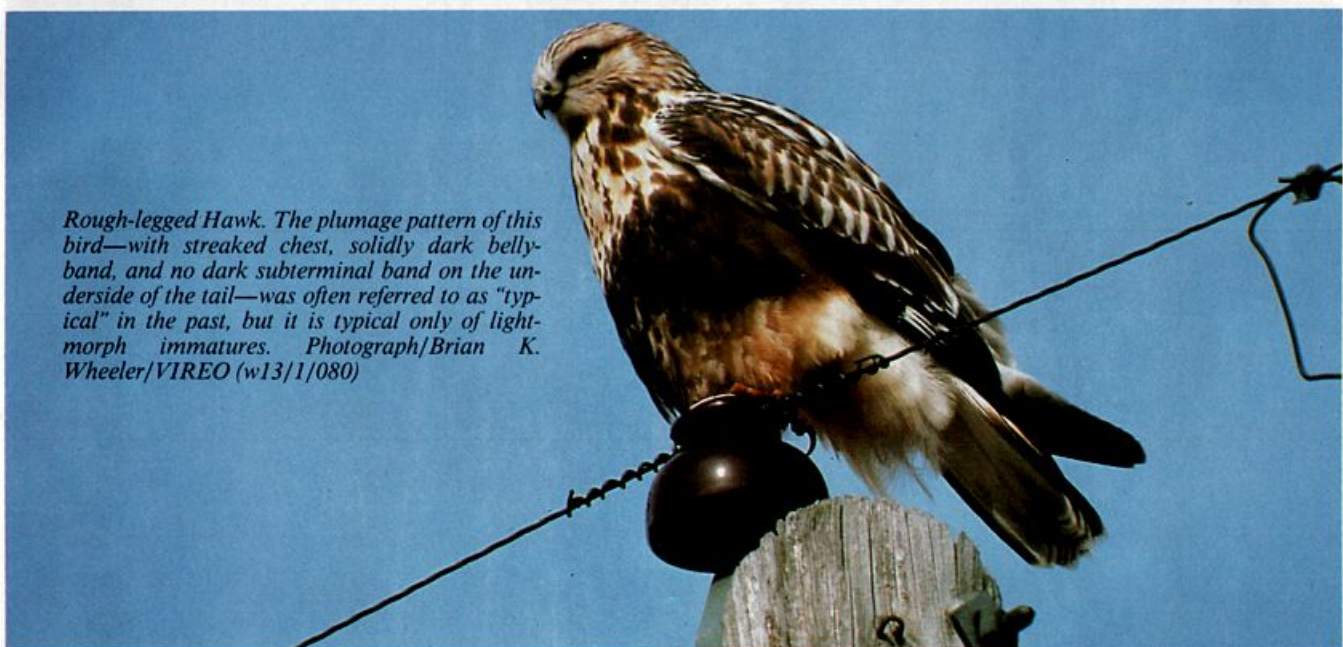


Red-tailed Hawk of the so-called "Kriders" form, a pale variant (probably not a valid subspecies) that crops up frequently in the population breeding on the northern Great Plains. Even on this pale bird, the dark patagial marks on the wings are visible. Photograph/Brian K. Wheeler/VIREO (w13/1/061)

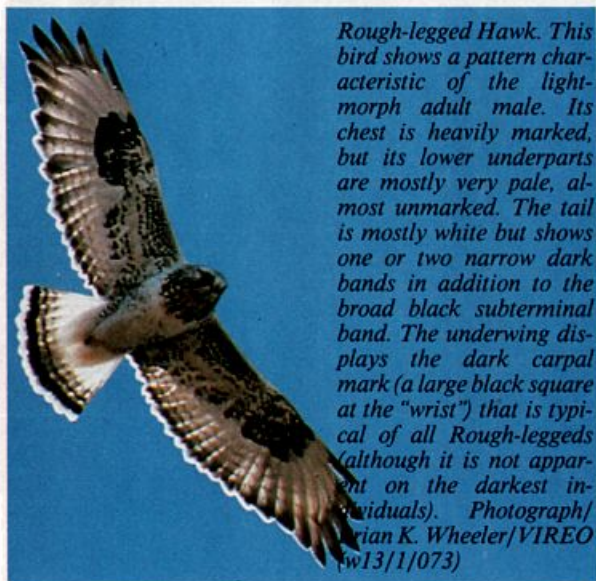




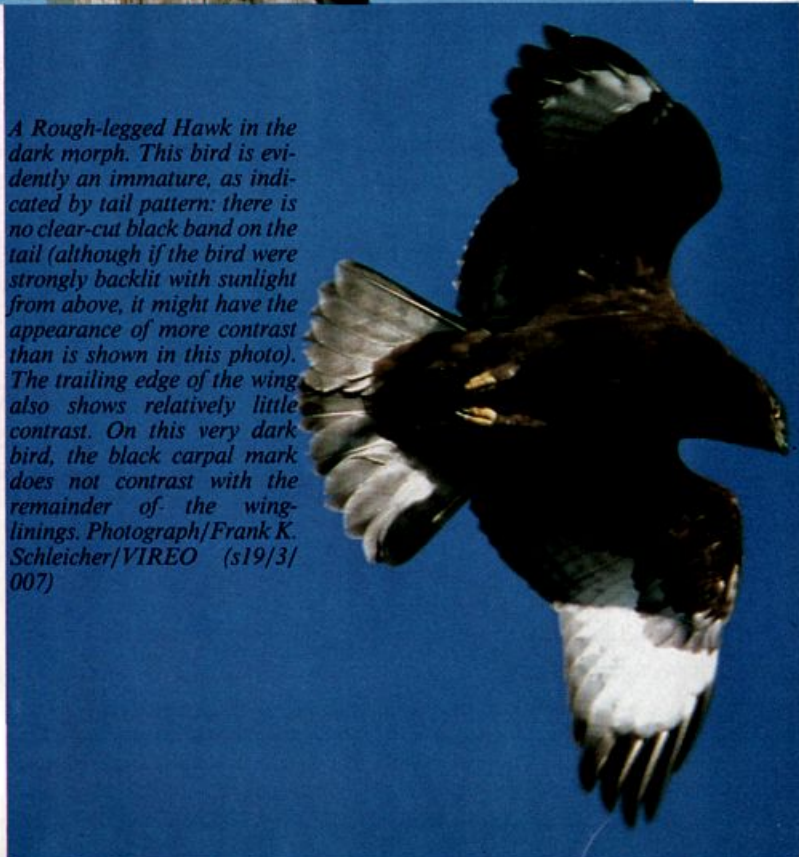
Adult Red-tailed Hawk of the "Harlan's" form, once considered a separate species but now regarded as a race breeding in Alaska and wintering mostly on the southern Great Plains. Compared to dark-morph Red-taileds of other races, Harlan's is usually a "colder" black without brown or rufous tones. Tail pattern of typical Harlan's is diagnostic, whitish with a narrow dark subterminal band and lengthwise gray mottling on each tail feather. The bird usually has white streaking on the chest and often white mottling on the wing-linings, and its flight silhouette is like that of other Red-taileds. Photograph/Brian K. Wheeler/VIREO (w13/1/037)



Rough-legged Hawk. The plumage pattern of this bird—with streaked chest, solidly dark belly-band, and no dark subterminal band on the underside of the tail—was often referred to as "typical" in the past, but it is typical only of light-morph immatures. Photograph/Brian K. Wheeler/VIREO (w13/1/080)



Rough-legged Hawk. This bird shows a pattern characteristic of the light-morph adult male. Its chest is heavily marked, but its lower underparts are mostly very pale, almost unmarked. The tail is mostly white but shows one or two narrow dark bands in addition to the broad black subterminal band. The underwing displays the dark carpal mark (a large black square at the "wrist") that is typical of all Rough-leggeds (although it is not apparent on the darkest individuals). Photograph/Brian K. Wheeler/VIREO (w13/1/073)

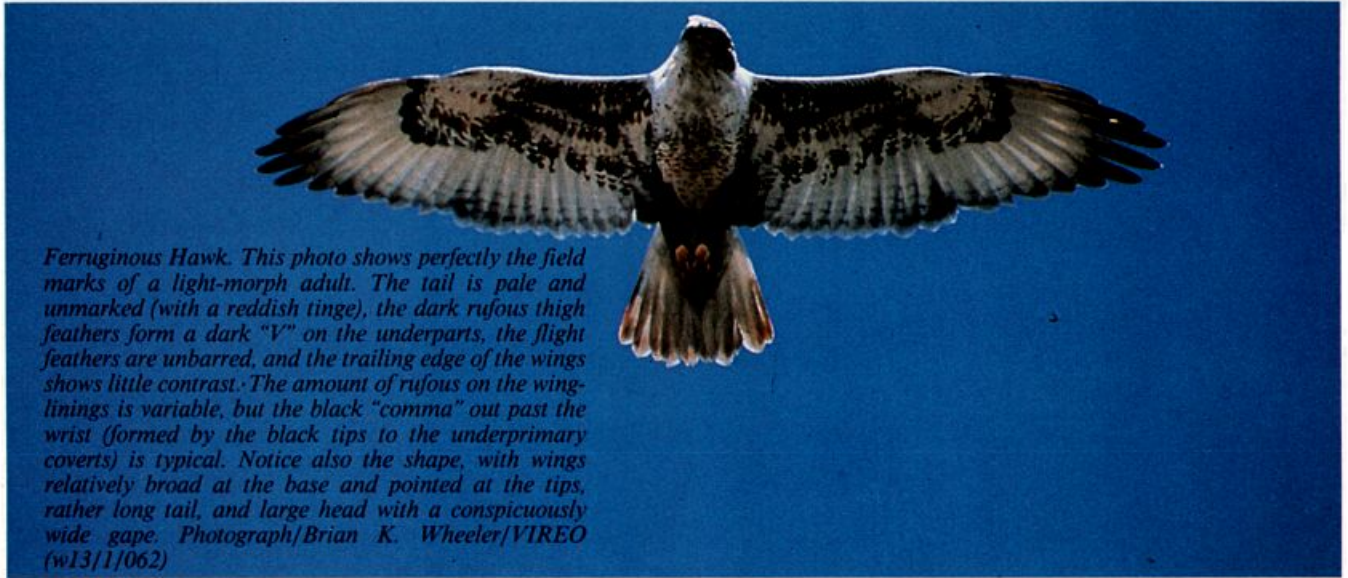


A Rough-legged Hawk in the dark morph. This bird is evidently an immature, as indicated by tail pattern: there is no clear-cut black band on the tail (although if the bird were strongly backlit with sunlight from above, it might have the appearance of more contrast than is shown in this photo). The trailing edge of the wing also shows relatively little contrast. On this very dark bird, the black carpal mark does not contrast with the remainder of the wing-linings. Photograph/Frank K. Schleicher/VIREO (s19/3/007)



*Rough-legged Hawk. This bird has the pattern of a dark-morph adult male, as shown by the narrow black and white bands in addition to the broad subterminal band on the tail. Its wing-linings are not solidly dark, so they show some contrast against the black carpal mark. Photograph/Brian K. Wheeler/VIREO (w13/1/083)*

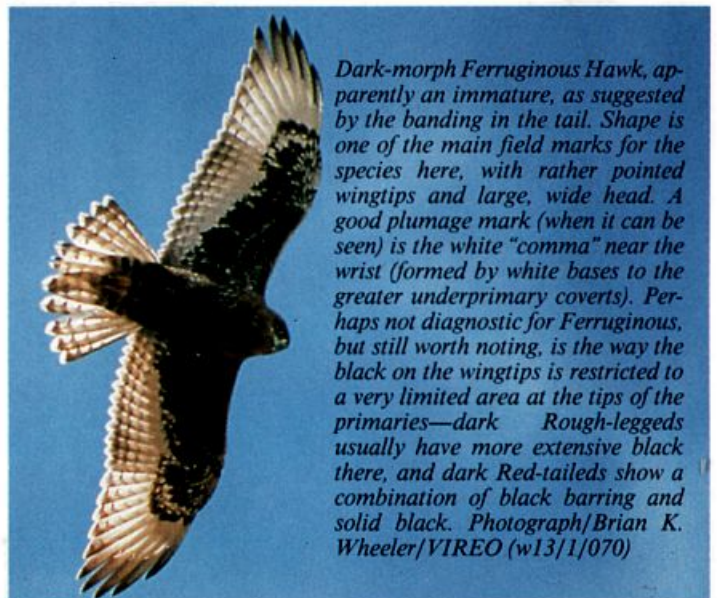
VIREO (Visual Resources for Ornithology), at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, is the world's first and foremost scientifically-curated collection of bird photographs. Established in 1979, the collection now holds well over 100,000 images, representing nearly half of the world's bird species. For more background, see the feature on VIREO by J.P. Myers *et al.* in *American Birds* Volume 38, Number 3, May-June 1984.



*Ferruginous Hawk. This photo shows perfectly the field marks of a light-morph adult. The tail is pale and unmarked (with a reddish tinge), the dark rufous thigh feathers form a dark "V" on the underparts, the flight feathers are unbarred, and the trailing edge of the wings shows little contrast. The amount of rufous on the wing-linings is variable, but the black "comma" out past the wrist (formed by the black tips to the underprimary coverts) is typical. Notice also the shape, with wings relatively broad at the base and pointed at the tips, rather long tail, and large head with a conspicuously wide gape. Photograph/Brian K. Wheeler/VIREO (w13/1/062)*



*Dark-morph adult Ferruginous Hawk. This bird has a trace of a reddish tinge to the tail and might be mistaken for one of the darker morphs of Red-tailed Hawk, or for the "Harlan's" Red-tailed. However, this bird has no dark subterminal bands in the tail (which should show up on all dark Red-taileds) and the trailing edges of its wings show relatively little contrast (the wings of almost all Red-taileds, especially dark ones, should have black trailing edges). This bird is apparently near the end of its wing molt, with a couple of the outermost primaries not fully grown, giving its wingtips an atypical shape. Photograph/Brian K. Wheeler/VIREO (w13/1/072)*



*Dark-morph Ferruginous Hawk, apparently an immature, as suggested by the banding in the tail. Shape is one of the main field marks for the species here, with rather pointed wingtips and large, wide head. A good plumage mark (when it can be seen) is the white "comma" near the wrist (formed by white bases to the greater underprimary coverts). Perhaps not diagnostic for Ferruginous, but still worth noting, is the way the black on the wingtips is restricted to a very limited area at the tips of the primaries—dark Rough-leggeds usually have more extensive black there, and dark Red-taileds show a combination of black barring and solid black. Photograph/Brian K. Wheeler/VIREO (w13/1/070)*