

Rough-legged Hawk

(*Buteo lagopus*)

OVERVIEW

Rough-legged Hawks are large buteos with long wings and somewhat long tails. In several ways they resemble a cross between a Red-tailed Hawk and a Northern Harrier. Their wings and tail are somewhat slimmer than those of Red-tailed Hawks, but broader than those of Harriers. Males are more Harrier-like than females, in that they are slightly smaller with slimmer wings, but telling sexes by shape is very difficult at a distance. Rough-legged Hawks also resemble Ferruginous Hawks, but have a slight bulge along the back edge of the secondaries and lack the angular look and sharply tapered wing tips of Ferruginous Hawks.

Rough-legged Hawks are steady but buoyant in flight and able to gain lift easily. They hold their wings in a shallow dihedral or modified dihedral similar to Harriers and are similar in profile at eye level; however, Rough-legged Hawks have bulky chests compared to those of Harriers. From overhead, Rough-legged Hawks appear “M”-shaped in a glide similar to Swainson’s Hawks, but show broader, less pointed wings. The wing beats of Rough-legged Hawks are deep but stiff and “wristy.” Rough-legged Hawks possess great stamina; they are able to hover for hours while in search of prey or migrate for long periods using powered flight.

PLUMAGE

Light Rough-legged Hawks are whitish below with black bellies and black carpals. *Juveniles and adult females* are nearly identical in plumage, but adult females show a

well-defined dark terminal edge to the wings and dark tail tip from below; the terminal band on the wings and tail on juveniles is ill defined. **Plumage of adult males varies from white underneath with dark mottling throughout the entire underbody to white underneath with only a dark bib and narrow carpal patches.** Bibbed males can look like adult Swainson’s Hawks, but Rough-legged Hawks always show pale flight feathers. Many adult males show multiple black tail bands, but this is hard to judge at a distance.

Light Rough-legged Hawks are brown on top with pale mottling along the upperwing coverts, and pale, sometimes whitish heads. **Juveniles have pale primary panels** that adult birds lack, but that birds in their first adult plumage can exhibit. **Adult males usually show grayish tones throughout the upperside, whereas adult females may have grayish tones on the back only.** Light Rough-legged Hawks have a **dark tail with a broad, white base**, but some (usually adult females) show white limited to the very base. Many adult males have multiple black tail bands that may be visible from above when the tail is fanned.

There is overlap in plumage between adult females and males. Some adult females have dark bibs, appearing dark overall with a white “necklace”; such heavily marked females lack multiple tail bands and extensive mottling on the underwing coverts. Adult males can look like females or typical males in their first adult plumage or any successive years. Juvenile males and females are identical in plumage.

Dark Rough-legged Hawks are dark brown underneath with pale flight feathers;



Rough-legged Hawk

some adult males are blackish. Sometimes the “wrists” and bellies are noticeably darker than the rest of the underside, but this is difficult to see at a distance. The flight feathers of adults are more boldly banded than are those of juveniles, giving the underwings a silvery appearance at times. **The trailing edge to the wings on adults shows a broad, dark band, whereas the terminal band on juveniles is less distinct.** The underside of the tail on dark birds appears identical to that of light birds when folded, but **most adult dark birds show multiple tail bands** that are visible from below when the tail is spread.

The topside of dark Rough-legged Hawks

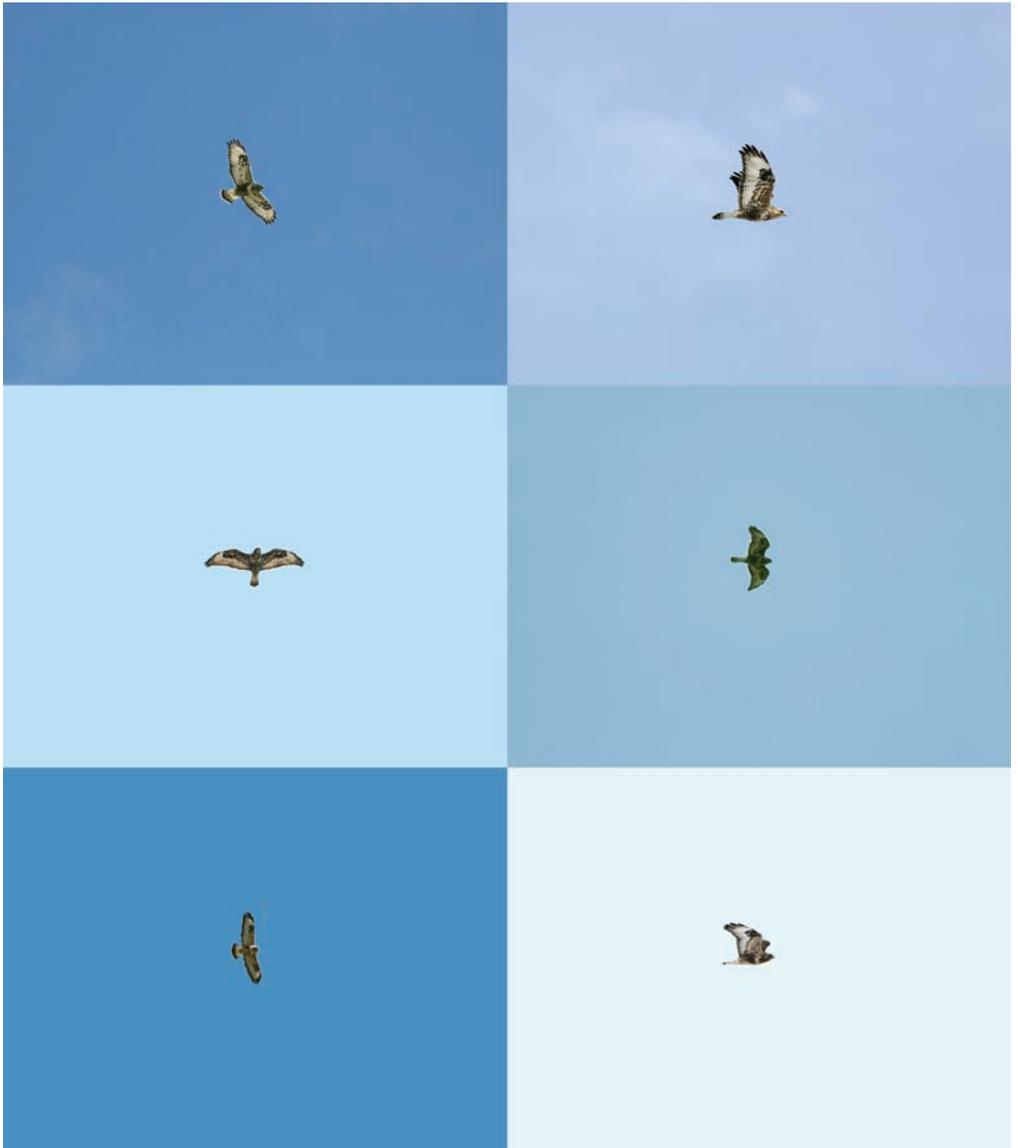
is **uniformly brownish**, lacking pale mottling along the upperwings. Blackish adult males show a dark gray-blue cast to the upperside. The pale wing panels of all juveniles are visible with good views. Juvenile dark birds have pale eyebrows and slightly paler cheeks than do adults, but dark birds in their first adult plumage can also show this head pattern. At a distance, the tail of juveniles is dark overall; adults can show dark tails or have narrow, white bands, but **all dark birds lack the white base to the tail that light birds show.** Some adults (especially males) show a small white patch on the back of the head that juvenile birds lack.



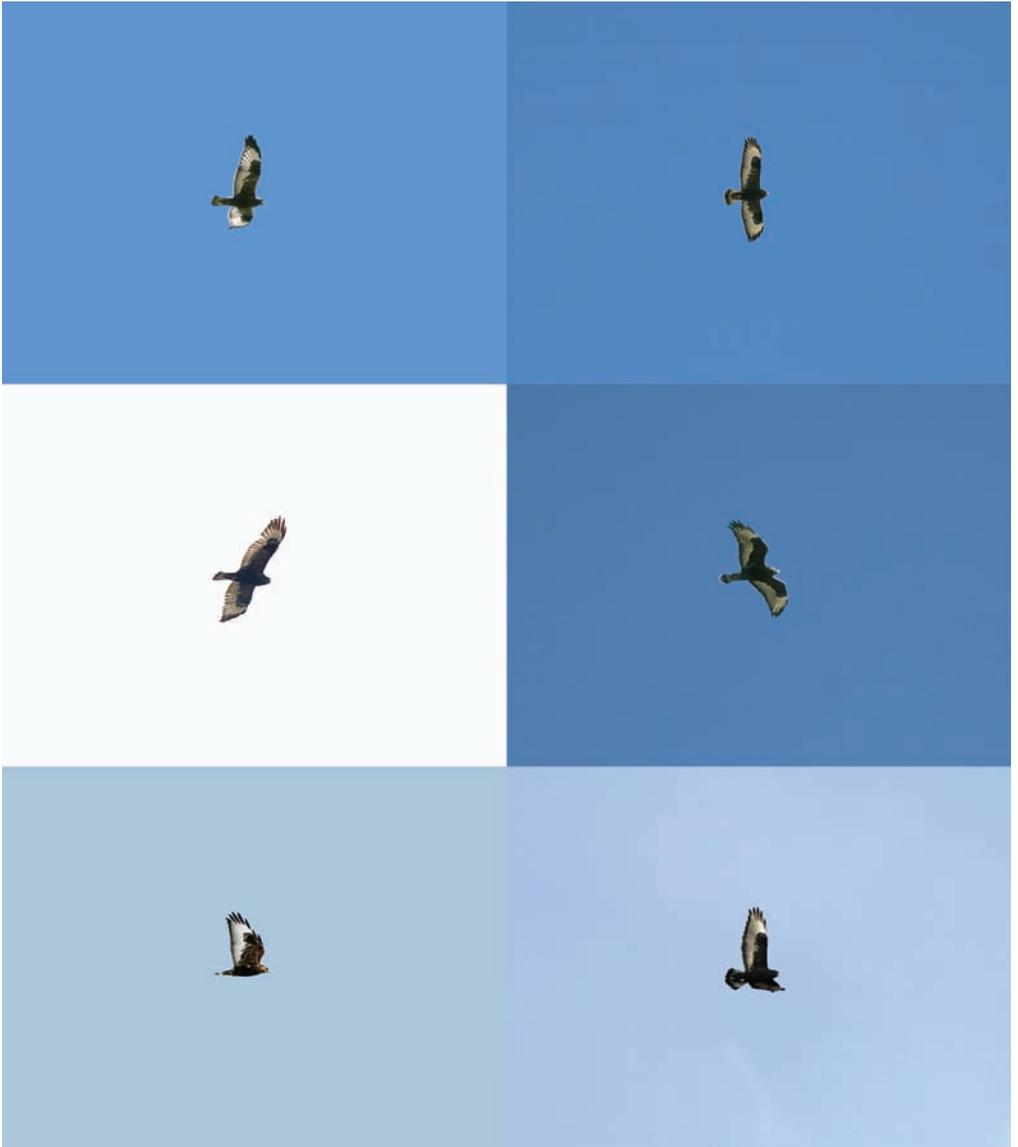
RL 01 - Juvenile light Rough-legged Hawks are pale below with a black belly and carpals and a dark, smudgy tail tip (top left). When backlit, the paler primaries of juveniles can be obvious (top right). **Adult light females** are similar to juveniles, but show a defined tail tip and dark trailing edge to wings (middle left). When backlit (middle right) or shadowed (bottom left), markings of **adult females** may be obscured. Head-on, **adult light females** typically show pale heads; the black belly and carpals may be visible (bottom right).



RL 02 - At eye level, **juveniles** (top left) and **adult females** (top right) appear similar; note the dark trailing edge to the wings on an adult. All Rough-legged Hawks show pointed wing tips when flapping. **Adult light males** can have pale bellies with dark chests and mottled underwings (middle left), and look particularly pale when backlit (middle right). Some **adult males** show defined bibs similar to those of Swainson's Hawks (bottom left). Over snow, the dark markings on light birds are highlighted; note the dark carpals and bib on this **adult male** (bottom right).



RL 03 - Some **adult males** are similar to adult females, but show less defined carpals, mottled chests and underwings, and multiple tail bands (top left). Some **adult males** are extremely marked on the underwings with darker carpals and a white chest band (top right). Heavily marked **adult males** can appear dark underneath with a paler chest band when shadowed (middle left) or a completely dark underbody in poor light (middle right). Adult females may have pale lower bellies while adult males may look female-like, making some birds impossible to categorize (bottom left, right).



RL 04 - Dark juveniles (top left) are similar to dark adults (top right), but are slightly paler underneath, lack a defined dark tail tip and trailing edge to wings, and often show pale primary panels. In overcast skies, dark birds appear blackish on the body (juvenile, middle left). Adult males and females can be identical in plumage, but some adult males show blackish bodies (middle right). In direct sunlight, the black carpals can contrast the slightly paler underwing coverts on dark birds (adult female, bottom left). Black adult males can show silvery primaries in direct sunlight (bottom right).



RL 05 - Adult dark males and females can both show multiple tail bands and be impossible to sex (top left), but dark adults lacking multiple tail bands are typically females (top right). Light juveniles are brown on top with white at the base of the tail and paler primaries (middle left), but in poor light can appear dark (middle right). Head-on, light juveniles show a pale chest, head, and a pale leading edge to the wings (bottom left). In spring, light juveniles are paler on top than usual due to fading; note the pale wing panels (bottom right).



RL 06 - Light juveniles (top left) and adult light females (top right) are similar on top, but the pale wing panels and mottling on the upperwings of juveniles are more distinct. Adult light males are similar to females, but show a grayish tone on the back (middle left) and may show a grayish head and secondaries (middle right). All Rough-legged Hawks have a white tail base, but this is limited on some birds (adult female, bottom left). Head-on, the pale head of most light Rough-legged Hawks is evident (adult female, bottom right).



RL 07 - Dark juveniles are darker on top than are light juveniles and lack a white tail base; note the pale wing panels (top left). In spring, dark birds can appear paler than usual, especially juveniles (shown, top right). **Dark adults** show darker uppersides than do dark juveniles. **Adult females** have a dark tail with a blackish tip (middle left), or multiple tail bands like **adult males** (middle right), but lack a grayish sheen to the back. **Light birds** in poor light (bottom left) can appear dark on top. **Dark birds** in poor light may appear jet black on top (bottom right).