

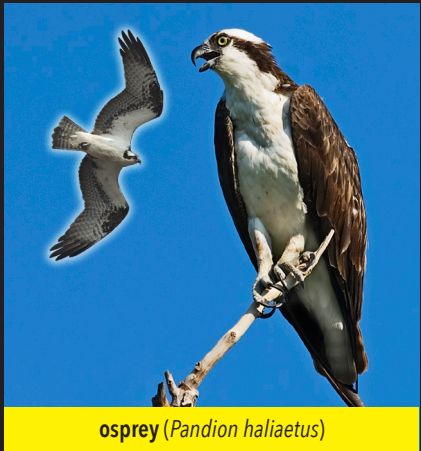
# Illinois RAPTORS



black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*)



turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*)



osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)



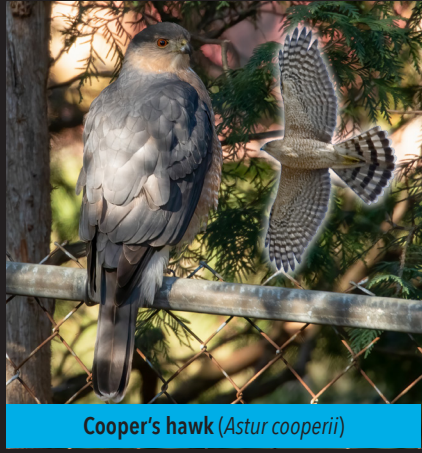
swallow-tailed kite (*Elanoides forficatus*)



golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*)



sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*)



Cooper's hawk (*Astur cooperii*)



American Goshawk (*Astur atricapillus*)



northern harrier (*Circus hudsonius*)



bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)



Mississippi kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*)



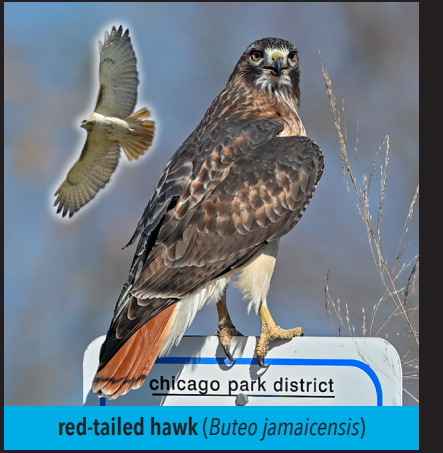
red-shouldered hawk (*Buteo lineatus*)



broad-winged hawk (*Buteo platypterus*)



Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*)



red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)



rough-legged hawk (*Buteo lagopus*)



American barn owl (*Tyto furcata*)



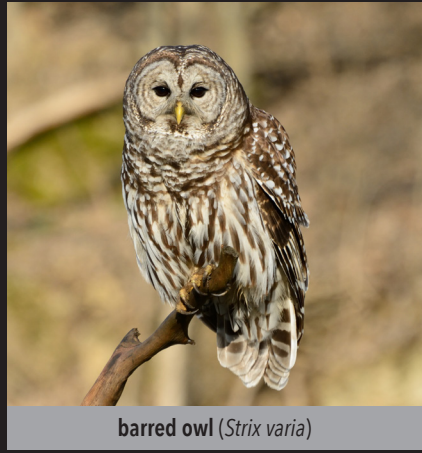
eastern screech-owl (*Megascops asio*)



great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*)



snowy owl (*Bubo scandiacus*)



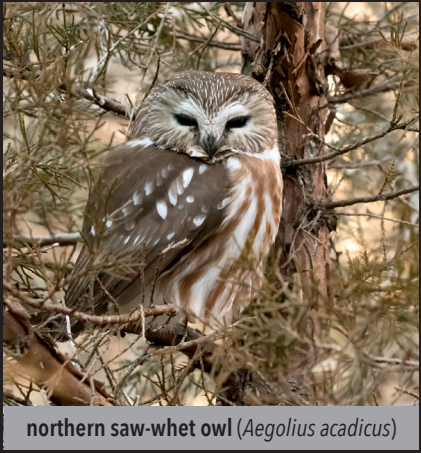
barred owl (*Strix varia*)



long-eared owl (*Asio otus*)



short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus*)



northern saw-whet owl (*Aegolius acadicus*)



American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*)



merlin (*Falco columbarius*)



peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)



prairie falcon (*Falco mexicanus*)



Family Cathartidae

Family Pandionidae

Family Accipitridae

Family Tytonidae

Family Strigidae

Family Falconidae

## TYPES OF RAPTORS

Raptors are birds of prey. Raptors include vultures, osprey, hawks, kites, eagles, harriers, owls, and falcons. Most of these amazing animals have large eyes that face forward, powerful talons and a hooked beak. Vultures' feet aren't as powerful, as they don't typically hunt live prey. Raptors' sense of hearing and vision are excellent. Female birds of prey are larger than males of the same species. Most raptors capture and eat a variety of prey items including amphibians, reptiles, insects, mammals, fishes and other birds. Vultures eat carrion. Hawks, falcons and owls utilize similar habitats but often reduce competition by hunting at different times and prey selection.



**New World vultures** - Vultures have a medium-sized black body. They soar high in the air in circles, searching for dead organisms (carrion). The head is small and bare. The sexes are similar in appearance. During flight, the wings form a shallow "V."



**ospreys** - These birds can be recognized by their wings that appear to be "bent" or "angled" as they fly. Found near large bodies of water, they dive feet first to catch fishes.



**kites** - These medium-sized hawks have pointed wings. Their hooked beak helps them to feed on prey items.



**eagles** - Eagles are larger than hawks and have longer wings. Their bill is large and powerful, though typically shorter than the length of their head.



**accipiters** - The true hawks have a long tail (like a rudder) and short, rounded wings. When flying, they make several quick wing beats and then glide. These hawks are agile and fast.



**harriers** - Harriers fly close to the ground and hold their wings in a "V" shape during flight. These birds have a long, thin body with long, rounded wings, long legs, and tail. Male and female harriers are distinguishable by their plumage, males being gray while females typically more reddish.



**buteos** - These large hawks fly on broad, slow-beating wings that allow them to soar while searching for prey. They perch on tree limbs, fence posts, and utility poles.



**owls** - Owls have fringed outer wing feathers for silent flight. Their wings are rounded, and the tail is short. These birds can turn their heads around 270 degrees (but not fully around!).



**falcons** - Falcons have long, thin, pointed wings, a short bill and a streamlined body. They are known for their speed during dives for prey.

## CONSERVATION

At the turn of the century, nine raptor species were listed as endangered or threatened in Illinois. Through many successful conservation efforts, including habitat improvements, monitoring projects, and species reintroductions, the picture is much brighter. Since 2000, the peregrine falcon, red-shouldered hawk, bald eagle, American barn owl, and Mississippi kite have all been removed from the list. As of 2025, only four raptor species remain on the Illinois List of Endangered and Threatened Species. The short-eared owl, Swainson's hawk, and northern harrier are still listed as state endangered. Osprey reintroductions have been showing signs of success and in 2020, the osprey was reclassified from state endangered to state threatened.

## SPECIES DESCRIPTIONS

### ORDER CATHARTIFORMES

#### Family Cathartidae

- black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) - The black vulture averages 23 to 27 inches in length. It has a short tail. Except for white patches in the wing tips which can be seen as it flies, this bird is entirely black, including its bare head and legs. It is a permanent resident in southern Illinois.
- turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*) - The turkey vulture can be found statewide through most of the year. Adults are 26 to 32 inches long. This bird has a bare, red head and red feet. The underside of the wing feathers is black near the body and gray at the outer edge. The body feathers are black. The wingspan of a turkey vulture is nearly six feet.

### ORDER ACCIPITRIFORMES

#### Family Pandionidae

- osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) - The osprey can be found around Illinois' large rivers and lakes. It is 23 to 25 inches long and has a wingspan of 54 to 56 inches. Fishes are the main component of this bird's diet. It can plunge from high in the air and go completely under water to catch them. The distinctive bend in the wings helps to identify this bird as it flies.

#### Family Accipitridae

- swallow-tailed kite (*Elanoides forficatus*) - The swallow-tailed kite has a distinctive deeply forked tail with black and white feathers. It is slender with long, narrow pointed wings (wingspan of 48 inches, 19 to 25 inches long). It feasts mainly on insects, but will eat small amphibians, reptiles, and birds. They spend most of their time in the air near swamps, marshes and large rivers. This species is an uncommon visitor in Illinois, usually found close to major rivers.
- golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) - The golden eagle is one of the largest birds of prey in North America (30 to 40 inches long; wingspan 73 to 87 inches). It occasionally winters around large rivers and lakes in Illinois, feeding mainly on small mammals, birds, fishes, and deer carcasses. The adult is covered with dark feathers, while the juvenile shows some white on the wings in flight and white at the base of the tail.
- sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) - The sharp-shinned hawk is a small (10 to 14 inches long; wingspan 21 to 26 inches) raptor with a square tip on the tail, red to orange eyes and rounded wings. The back is dark gray while the breast is barred with red-orange feathers. It breeds in forests. It feeds on birds and small mammals.
- Cooper's hawk (*Astur cooperii*) - Found in deciduous woodlands and urban areas, this common hawk is often seen perched as it hunts for small mammals, birds, reptiles and insects. It has a long, rounded tail with at least four black bands. A Cooper's hawk is 14 to 20 inches long with a wingspan of 27 to 36 inches.
- American goshawk (*Astur atricapillus*) - This species (21 to 26 inches long; wingspan 39 to 45 inches) rarely winters in the northern one-fourth of Illinois. It is a summer and permanent resident in Canada, Alaska and mountainous regions of the western United States. The broad white stripe over the eye is a distinguishing feature.
- northern harrier (*Circus hudsonius*) - The northern harrier is a common migrant and uncommon winter and summer resident in Illinois. It inhabits marshes and open fields. It can be identified in flight by the white patch at the base of the tail, the dark tip on the underside of each wing, and the shallow "v" formed by the wings as it glides low over the ground. It is 18 to 21 inches long with a 42-inch wingspan. Females are much larger.
- bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) - The bald eagle lives along rivers or near lakes with large trees. It is 31 to 37 inches long with a wingspan of 70 to 90 inches. Fishes make up the main part of the diet, but this raptor also feeds on small birds, dead animals, turtles, rabbits, and wounded waterfowl. The adult bald eagle has a white head, neck and tail, but a juvenile bald eagle is uniformly dark.
- Mississippi kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) - Open habitats with tall trees used for nesting in the southern half of Illinois provide habitat for the Mississippi kite. It has dark-red eyes, pointed wings and a squared tail. This bird is 14 to 15 inches long with a wingspan of 32 to 36 inches. Frogs, reptiles and insects make up most of its diet.
- red-shouldered hawk (*Buteo lineatus*) - The rust-colored patch of feathers on the upper edge of each wing supplies the common name for this species. It is a com-

mon resident of lowland woods near rivers and can be seen statewide. The bird is 16 to 20 inches long with a wingspan of 36 to 44 inches. Preferred foods include amphibians, birds, reptiles and rodents.

- broad-winged hawk (*Buteo platypterus*) - This species can commonly be seen in mid-September migration across Illinois. It is an uncommon resident at other times of the year throughout the state, except in southern Illinois. The white bands on the tail help to identify this bird as it soars in the air. The body is 15 to 16 inches long with a wingspan of 34 to 48 inches. Birds, frogs, insects, snakes and small mammals make up this hawk's diet.
- Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*) - This raptor (19 to 21 inches long; wingspan 47 to 57 inches) is a rare summer resident of open grasslands and agricultural areas in northern Illinois. Adults have two color forms: light and dark. The flight feathers appear dark gray when seen in silhouette on both color morphs, and the bird soars with the wings held above horizontal. Its diet consists of birds, small mammals, insects, amphibians and reptiles.
- red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) - Our most common raptor, the red-tailed hawk is often seen perched along roadways as it hunts for small mammals, birds, insects, lizards, and snakes. The rust-colored tail, developed after its second year, is a distinctive field mark. It is 19 to 22 inches long with a wingspan of 46 to 55 inches. The red-tailed hawk exhibits tremendous variation in plumage, from pure white (leucistic), to nearly all black (Harlan's subspecies).
- rough-legged hawk (*Buteo lagopus*) - The rough-legged hawk (21 to 22 inches long; wingspan 48 to 56 inches) is an uncommon winter resident statewide in Illinois, where it feeds on small mammals and small birds. The tail is white with a broad dark band or bands, the legs are covered with feathers, and the wings show much white in flight when seen in silhouette. It is a large and powerful raptor.

### ORDER STRIGIFORMES

#### Family Tytonidae

- American barn owl (*Tyto furcata*) - The American barn owl nests and roosts in old barns near prairies, farms, marshes and open areas. It has a white, heart-shaped face and long legs. The middle talon on each foot is serrated. This bird is 16 to 24 inches long with a wingspan of 38 to 45 inches. Its prey includes mice, voles, insects, ground squirrels and small birds.

#### Family Strigidae

- eastern screech-owl (*Megascops asio*) - A common but seldom seen permanent resident of Illinois forests, swamps, parks, gardens and orchards, the screech-owl is very small (7 to 10 inches long; wingspan 20 to 22 inches) and has ear tufts. The body feathers may be either red-brown or gray. It hunts at night for rodents in winter and insects in summer. This species readily uses nesting boxes provided by humans.
- great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*) - This adaptable species lives in woodlands, city parks, and suburban areas. It has a flattened face with large yellow eyes, long ear tufts, and a black bill. Its length of 21 to 22 inches and wingspan of 48 to 62 inches make it the state's largest resident owl species. Hunting at night, it feeds on small owls, hawks, waterfowl, mice, reptiles, skunks, squirrels and voles.
- snowy owl (*Bubo scandiacus*) - The snowy owl may sporadically visit Illinois in winter, in open areas, fields, around lakes, and on golf courses in northern and central Illinois, though records as far as southern Illinois are not unheard of. Its body feathers are white with black markings. This large owl (22 to 24 inches long; wingspan of 51 to 71 inches) hunts during daylight for its prey of mice, cottontails, voles, birds, fishes and dead animals. Its feet and toes are layered with feathers, a trait unique to this species and needed in its usual Arctic range.
- barred owl (*Strix varia*) - This common large bird (20 to 21 inches long; wingspan 38 to 50 inches) lives in woodlands and open areas near rivers and swamps. Its prey consists of mice, amphibians, birds, crayfish, fishes, insects and small mammals. Both horizontal and vertical dark stripes can be seen on its belly.
- long-eared owl (*Asio otus*) - An uncommon and not often seen- winter resident in Illinois, the long-eared owl (14-15 inches long; wingspan 35-39 inches) lives in densely wooded areas that are near the open grasslands where it hunts at night. This species feeds mainly on small mammals. It is a thin owl with vertical streaks on the breast, long ear tufts and black feathers around the eyes.

- short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus*) - The short-eared owl is an uncommon migrant and winter resident throughout Illinois. It resides in prairies, marshes, meadows, fields and parks. The short-eared owl has very short ear tufts. This bird is 13 to 17 inches long with a wingspan of 38 to 44 inches. Rodents, insects and small birds are the prey species that it hunts for in late afternoon and early evening.
- northern saw-whet owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) - The northern saw-whet owl (7 to 9 inches long; wingspan 18 to 24 inches) is a winter resident of Illinois woodlands. This small owl has no ear tufts. Other identifying features are red streaks on the belly, white streaks on the forehead and a black bill. It hunts at night, feeding on small mammals. It roosts in conifers.

### ORDER FALCONIFORMES

#### Family Falconidae

- American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) - This common bird can be found around forest edges, open fields, parks and roadsides as it searches for insects, rodents, birds, reptiles and amphibians. This small falcon (10 to 11 inches long; wingspan of 20 to 24 inches) is often seen hovering along roadways. The dark vertical line through each eye, white cheeks and rust-colored patch on the head help to identify this bird. The male has blue wings, while the female's wings are rust-colored.
- merlin (*Falco columbarius*) - The merlin (11 to 12 inches long; wingspan 24 to 27 inches) is an uncommon winter resident in Illinois and may be seen in open areas, marshes and urban habitats. Nesting pairs were confirmed in northern Illinois in 2025. It feeds mainly on small birds which it catches in flight. The pointed wings and broad, black bands on the tail help to identify this species.
- peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) - The peregrine falcon (16 to 20 inches long; wingspan 43 to 46 inches) was once extremely rare in the state. The yellow feet/legs, black "sideburns" and white throat are good field marks to help identify this species. It hunts birds in flight at dawn and dusk. This raptor can reach speeds of up to 240 miles per hour when in a stoop (diving) and 75 miles per hour in normal flight.
- prairie falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) - The prairie falcon is a large falcon (14 to 19 inches long, wingspan 35 to 45 inches) with long, pointed wings. They have a white line over the eye, a brown mustache stripe at the beak with yellow legs and feet. It is a very rare winter resident. They prefer wide open spaces like agricultural fields or prairie habitat. They eat mainly smaller mammals, birds and insects.

## PHOTOGRAPHERS

#### Photos © Rob Curtis/The Early Birder

black vulture, black vulture flying, osprey, osprey flying, Mississippi kite, Mississippi kite flying, bald eagle, bald eagle flying, northern harrier, northern harrier flying, sharp-shinned hawk, sharp-shinned hawk flying, Cooper's hawk flying, red-shouldered hawk flying, broad-winged hawk, Swainson's hawk flying, red-tailed hawk, red-tailed hawk flying, rough-legged hawk, rough-legged hawk flying, American barn owl, great horned owl flying, long-eared owl flying, short-eared owl, short-eared owl flying, American kestrel, American kestrel flying, merlin, merlin flying, peregrine falcon, peregrine falcon flying

#### Photos © Alan Murphy Photography

swallow-tailed kite, swallow-tailed kite flying, prairie falcon, prairie falcon flying

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American goshawk, broad-winged hawk flying, golden eagle, golden eagle flying, great horned owl

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Cooper's hawk, long-eared owl, northern saw-whet owl

#### Photos © Mary Kay Rubey

red-shouldered hawk, Swainson's hawk

#### Photos © Rick Remington

snowy owl, barred owl

#### Photo © Jacques Nuzzo

eastern screech-owl

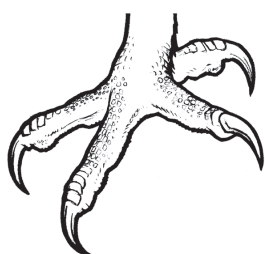
#### Photos © Illinois Department of Natural Resources

turkey vulture, turkey vulture flying

## ADAPTATIONS

Birds of prey have ear openings on each side of the head behind and beneath the eyes. The ears are usually covered with feathers. Owls and harriers have a facial disk (round face) that helps funnel sound to the ears.

Turkey vultures can find carrion by their sense of smell. Black vultures use primarily sight.



A talon, or claw, can be found at the tip of each of the eight toes. Talons are made of keratin and are extremely sharp. The downward-curved shape, sharpness and length of each talon make it difficult for raptors to walk on the ground. Strong leg muscles and toes along with the talons allow raptors to effectively capture and kill prey.

Raptors have exceptional vision. Their forward-facing eyes provide binocular vision and increased depth perception. The eyes of these birds are so large that they cannot move within the eye socket. Because their eyes are large and relatively fixed in the skull, they must turn their heads to see to the side.

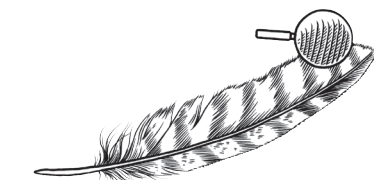
The long, flexible neck allows them to turn their head almost backwards. Owls cannot see in total darkness but are capable of vision in very dim light. The retina of their eye has structures that are very sensitive to light but not to color. The pupil in each owl's eye can function independently, an advantage when hunting in areas of varied light and shadow. They can dilate or constrict one pupil to manage light levels.

A bird's beak is made of bone and covered with keratin. In birds of prey, the tip of the beak is hooked, and the edges are sharp in order to tear meat. A falcon's upper beak is notched and is used to sever the neck vertebrae of its prey. Raptors have a soft fleshy area,



called the cere, at the base of the upper bill. The cere is featherless and helps these meat-eating birds keep the area around the bill clean.

Owls eat their prey whole or in large chunks. They cannot digest everything they swallow. "Pellet" is the term for the bones, hair, shells and other items that cannot be digested. Owls cough up these pellets and they are expelled through their mouth.



Owls make almost no sound when they fly. Silent flight is a great assistance to catching prey. Owl wings are very large for their body size, and their outer wing feathers are fringed to reduce noise.

Birds of prey use several nesting strategies. The peregrine falcon does not spend any energy making a nest. It lays its eggs on a high bluff or ledge of a tall building. The eastern screech-owl and American kestrel use a tree cavity or nesting box to place their nest. The males of many raptor species collect sticks, feathers, leaves and mosses that the female uses to construct the nest. Bald eagles may use the same nest year after year, adding more branches, roots and corn stalks each year.

## AGENCY RESOURCES

More information about Illinois raptors is available from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR). The Division of Natural Heritage manages and monitors bird populations. Natural Heritage personnel also provide assistance to landowners regarding establishing and maintaining raptor habitat. The IDNR Division of Education provides supplemental resources for educators to use, including activity books and the educational resources trunk available for loan. Wood Projects for Illinois Wildlife is an IDNR booklet that includes plans for nesting boxes that are used by some raptors. Publications are available through the website.

#### Illinois Department of Natural Resources

Division of Education  
One Natural Resources Way, Springfield, IL 62702  
217-524-4126 • [dnr.illinois.gov/education.html](mailto:dnr.illinois.gov/education.html)  
[dnr.teachkids@illinois.gov](mailto:dnr.teachkids@illinois.gov)

Division of Natural Heritage  
217-785-8691 • [dnr.illinois.gov](mailto:dnr.illinois.gov)

#### Illinois Audubon Society

P. O. Box 2547 (mailing)  
Springfield, IL 62708  
217-544-2473 • [www.illinoisaudubon.org](http://www.illinoisaudubon.org)

