
2008
Louisiana Raptors
birds of prey

What is a raptor?

Darlene Boucher, Photographer

Charlie Hohorst, Photographer

Carl Sheely, Photographer

George Ritchey, Photographer

Many different kinds of birds prey on other animals. For example, pelicans capture and eat fish, flycatchers take insects, and sandpipers probe for aquatic invertebrates. But one group of birds stands out as the ultimate aerial predator. These are the raptors or "birds of prey," and they all share a specialized set of characteristics that better equip them for locating, pursuing, capturing, and killing prey. Perhaps the most prominent features of most raptor species are strong legs and feet, combined with toes that are equipped with sharp, curved, and strong claws or "talons," that are used as the primary weapon for capturing, gripping, and dispatching prey. Most raptors also have a sharp, hooked bill, which can also be used to kill prey swiftly. More often, however, the bill is used as an efficient means to tear flesh from a carcass.

Raptors include two unrelated orders of birds, most easily separated by their general daily activities: the diurnal raptors or "day hunters" (order Falconiformes, which include vultures, hawks, eagles, and falcons) and the nocturnal raptors or "night hunters" (order Strigiformes, which include owls). This calendar focuses on diurnal "birds of prey" that frequent Louisiana.

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Greg Lavaty, Photographer

John Spohrer, Photographer

Carl Sheely, Photographer

Louisiana's diurnal raptors

Twenty-five species of Falconiformes have occurred in Louisiana. An amazing 16 species breed, or have bred, in our state. Twelve species are regular breeders- Black and Turkey vultures, Mississippi and Swallow-tailed kites, Cooper's, Red-shouldered, Broad-winged, and Red-tailed hawks, Bald Eagle, Osprey, Crested Caracara, and American Kestrel; Swainson's Hawk can probably be placed in this group, but regular breeding needs further confirmation. Nine species, including some breeding species, are much more regular in winter or as migrants: White-tailed Kite, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, American Kestrel, Merlin, and Peregrine Falcon.

Only a few of the hawk species that occur in Louisiana are year-round residents. Even those species considered "resident" may not in fact spend the entire year in one place: local birds may move out and be replaced by individuals that have bred elsewhere. Movements are generally driven by availability of food resources. Species which rely heavily on insects and reptiles are essentially forced to relocate to warmer southern regions because their prey becomes unavailable during the colder northern winter months. Many raptors that depend on small rodents cannot find prey in regions where snow can accumulate on the ground. The Northern Harrier represents one extreme, because it is relatively nomadic and shows year-to-year flexibility in finding wintering and breeding sites with high prey densities. Most species, however, show much stronger "site fidelity," returning to the same general breeding and wintering territories, sometimes even to the same nest, year after year. Migrant species include some of our longest distance Neotropical migrants: Peregrine Falcon (Arctic tundra to temperate South America) and Swallow-tailed Kite (southeastern United States to Amazonia). Swallow-tailed Kite, along with Mississippi Kite and Broad-winged Hawk are referred to as "complete migrants," meaning no individuals remain to winter in breeding areas. Northern populations of other species, such as Red-shouldered and Red-tailed hawks, are "partial migrants" shifting south in winter to southern portions of the breeding distribution but not much beyond, and potentially wintering side-by-side with more sedentary southern breeders. In general, individuals that breed at the northern extreme of a species' range move south in winter. The notable exception is the southern Bald Eagle, which breeds during the winter and then moves north to spend the summer and fall. Some species, such as the Broad-winged Hawk, migrate in large flocks, and circling "kettles" numbering into the hundreds or thousands of individuals can be observed during southbound flights following the first series of early fall cold fronts, their movement facilitated by strong tail winds.

In Louisiana, raptors are found in a variety of habitats, from dense forest to open agricultural areas, across our coastal marshes up to the beaches that front the Gulf of Mexico. Peregrine Falcons even use offshore oil platforms during migration and winter for roost and feeding sites. Distributions and population densities of breeding species tend to remain relatively stable from year to year as they depend on appropriate habitat and a stable prey base.

"Twenty-five species of Falconiformes have occurred in Louisiana. An amazing 16 species breed, or have bred, in our state."

Charlie Hohorst, Photographer

David Cagnolatti, Photographer

Arthur Morris, Photographer

Darlene Boucher, Photographer

Charlie Hohorst, Photographer

Gayle Clement, Photographer

David Cagnolatti, Photographer

Ronnie Gaubert, Photographer

Charlie Hohorst Photographer of Vignette

Identifying Louisiana's diurnal raptors

Charlie Hohorst, Photographer

Darlene Boucher, Photographer

Greg Lavaty, Photographer

George Ritchey, Photographer

Most hawks are fairly easy to "pigeon-hole" to general type (e.g., vulture, eagle, falcon, or specific genus such as *Buteo*, or *Accipiter*) based on size, shape, and proportions. The use of genus name is frequently used to refer to more closely related and very similar-looking species in the same genus.

For example, two species in the genus *Accipiter*, Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) and Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperi*), are closely related and have very similar shapes, proportions, plumages, and behaviors. They are so similar that they can only be positively identified to species by fairly experienced observers who get a close look. However, they can more easily be classified into the more general category "Accipiter" type of hawk (in Louisiana "Sharp-shinned/Cooper's hawk") based on the combination of thin body shape, short rounded wings, long narrow tail, and long thin legs.

Hawks come in four "basic body shapes": long broad wings and broad tail (eagles, vultures, *Buteo*, Osprey), shorter rounded wings and long tail (*Accipiter*), long rounded wings and long tail (harrier, caracara), and long pointed wings (kites and falcons). From these "basics" we can further refine shape and add behaviors, such as flight style, to narrow down our choices and identify a hawk to species.

The size range of most hawk species varies because of size differences between the sexes ("reverse sexual size dimorphism" which means females are larger than males). However, in the field such differences are not often appreciated unless a male and female are perched together, such as a pair at a nest. Notable exceptions are species in the genus *Accipiter*, which exhibit pronounced size dimorphism: the larger female Sharp-shinned is essentially the same size as the smaller male Cooper's. In this case, size is a very important identification character.

"Hawks come in four "basic body shapes": long broad wings and broad tail (eagles, vultures, *Buteo*, Osprey), shorter rounded wings and long tail (*Accipiter*), long rounded wings and long tail (harrier, caracara), and long pointed wings (kites and falcons)."

In most hawk species there is a distinct (different from the adult) first set of feathers referred to as the Juvenal plumage. Young hawks fledge the nest in Juvenal plumage and retain this set of feathers through their first winter and spring. Thus, most species acquire adult plumage during their second (calendar) year, this molt beginning when they are about one year old. The Juvenal plumage (for many species) is replaced by the adult (or Definitive) plumage. Subsequently, year after year and following each annual complete molt of feathers (always at the same time in the year), the appearance of adult plumage remains the same. Other species exhibit delayed maturation and there may be several additional molts and intermediate-looking plumages over a period of several years prior to attaining adult plumage. For example, the Bald Eagle has an extended plumage maturation period and does not attain adult plumage until the fifth year.

Geographic plumage differences are usually subtle. In Louisiana, the most pronounced example of geographic and individual variation is found in the Red-tailed Hawk–different subspecies, or even individuals of the same subspecies, can look dramatically different in plumage color. In a few species (e.g., American Kestrel), plumage of males and females is different.

Gayle Clement, Photographer

Darlene Boucher, Photographer

Darlene Boucher Photographer of Vignette

Raptor relationships with humans—are raptors beneficial?

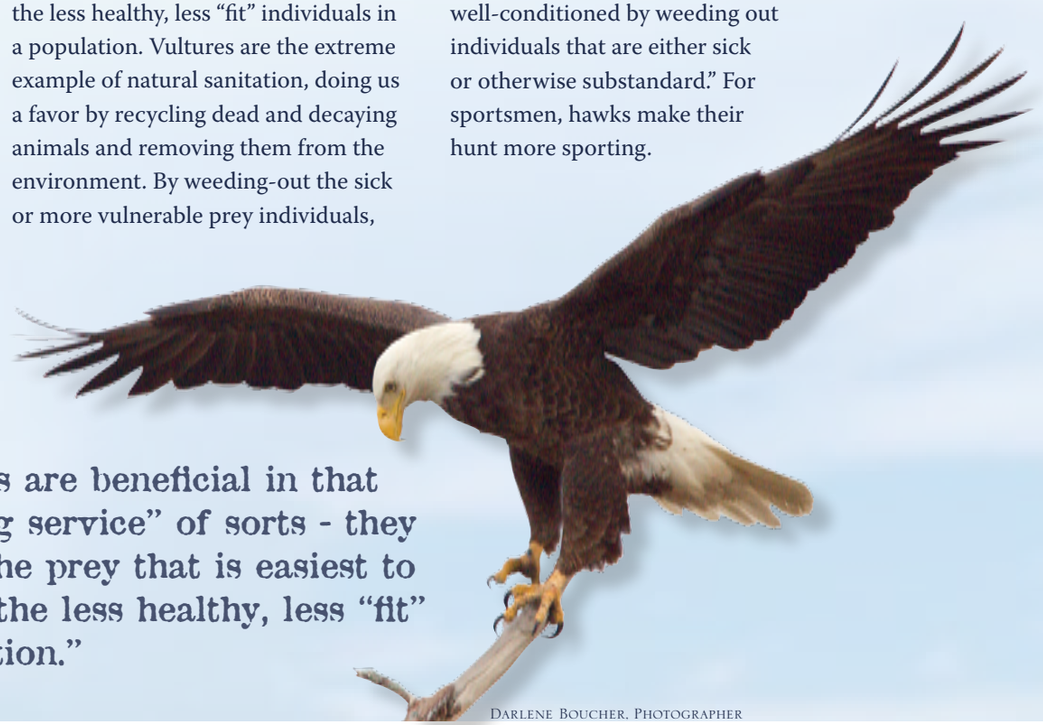
Whether depicted as a symbol of power by primitive cultures in cave drawings, celebrated in various passages in the Bible, a treasured pet and hunting companion through the centuries, or feared and demonized as varmints, raptors have a very long association with humans. More recently, following colonization of North America by European settlers, raptors were often the target of wanton destruction, their elimination perceived to protect assets: fish, game birds, and domestic poultry. Early "conservation studies" analyzed stomach contents or regurgitated pellets, and species were declared "good birds" (those that ate insects and rodents), or "bad birds" (whose diet included game birds, chickens, or songbirds). Unfortunately, the first conservation laws in the United States protected only good birds and allowed the slaughter of bad birds, with the additional incentive of bounties placed on "bad bird" carcasses. This approach put many species at risk and large numbers of hawks were killed for no reason other than being a hawk. Large numbers were killed during migration as flocks passed over promontories along migration corridors.

Although the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1916 protected some species of birds, raptors were not included. Legal protection was slow in coming. In 1940, the United States enacted the first federal law, the National Emblem Law, to protect the Bald Eagle (although this protection did not extend to Alaska). This law was amended in 1962 to add Golden Eagle. But it was not until amendment of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act on March 10, 1972, that protection was extended to the other raptor species. Most people now realize the beneficial nature of raptors and most predators in general.

Raptors and scavengers are beneficial in that they provide a "cleaning service" of sorts - they will typically go after the prey that is easiest to catch, which is usually the less healthy, less "fit" individuals in a population. Vultures are the extreme example of natural sanitation, doing us a favor by recycling dead and decaying animals and removing them from the environment. By weeding-out the sick or more vulnerable prey individuals, and by thinning out prey species that periodically overpopulate and overwhelm their own resources, raptors help maintain a natural balance. As "top of the food chain" predators that are sensitive to ecological disruptions, raptors are often among the first and best indicators of environmental problems that can also impact human populations. And, finally, as handsome, often conspicuous, highly developed aerial predators, raptors are good and necessary because they provide us with entertainment, enjoyment, and inspiration.

As George H. Lowery, Jr. said in ***Louisiana Birds***, hawks "perform an invaluable role in the natural scheme of things, that they help keep the populations of their prey healthy and well-conditioned by weeding out individuals that are either sick or otherwise substandard." For sportsmen, hawks make their hunt more sporting.

"Raptors and scavengers are beneficial in that they provide a "cleaning service" of sorts - they will typically go after the prey that is easiest to catch, which is usually the less healthy, less "fit" individuals in a population."



Darlene Boucher, Photographer

David Cagnolatti, Photographer

Louisiana's 2008 Bird Watching Dates to Remember

Eagle Expo 2008
February 14 – 16, 2008, Morgan City
Contact info 985-395-4905

Audubon Country Birdfest
April 4 – 6, 2008, St. Francisville
Contact info 800-488-6502

The Great Louisiana Birdfest
April 11 – 13, 2008, Mandeville
Contact info 985-626-1238

Grand Isle Migratory Bird Celebration
April 18 – 20, 2008, Grand Isle
Contact info 800-259-0869

Neotropical Songbird Tour Atchafalaya Basin
May 10, 2008, Sherburne Wildlife Management Area
Contact info 318-793-5529

Wood Stork Day
July 22, 2008, Sherburne Wildlife Management Area
Contact info 337-948-0255

Feliciana Hummingbird Celebration
July 25 – 26, 2008, St. Francisville
Contact info 800-488-6502

Folsom Hummingbird Festival
September 6, 2008, Folsom
Contact 985-796-9309

Wings Over the Wetlands
Boardwalk tours and programs each weekend in October
Jean Lafitte National Park & Preserve
Contact info 504-589-2330

For more information about these events, please visit
http://birdlouisiana.com

Red-tailed Hawk Photographed by: David Chauvin

january 2008

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
DECEMBER 30	31	1	2	3	4	5
➤ *Red-tailed Hawks sometimes hunt cooperatively "surrounding" tree squirrels.*		NEW YEAR'S DAY	*Plant native trees and shrubs this month*			***Christmas Bird Count ends** (began December 14, 2007)*
6	7	8	9	10 ***LA Winter Bird Atlas starts** its second season* SAVE THE EAGLES DAY	11	12
13	14	15	16	17 *Red Maple blooms decorate the swamps*	18	19
20	21 MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.'S BIRTHDAY	22	23	24	25 **LA. Ornithological Society Winter Meeting**	26
27 **LOS Winter Meeting**	28	29	30	31	FEBRUARY 1	2

Red-tailed Hawk
(*Buteo jamaicensis*)

Perhaps our most common and conspicuous winter raptor is the Red-tailed Hawk, which can be found in many habitats throughout the state. In winter, the species is most abundant in open farmland and semi-open pasture land with a good supply of rodent prey, and most everyone is familiar with this species perched atop a dead snag, fence post, or roadside utility pole. Such vantage points allow a hawk to use its exceptionally keen eyesight to patiently scan the surroundings for a potential meal. Prey, perhaps an unsuspecting rat or snake, are usually taken on the ground as the hawk makes a beeline from its perch. Red-taileds also hunt on the wing and can often be seen soaring, or hovering on flapping wings, above areas that harbor prey.

Red-tailed Hawks are only found in North America, Central America and the West Indies. Across this broad range, populations show a great deal of variation and there are sixteen named subspecies. The eastern subspecies nests and is probably resident in Louisiana, but northern nesting *borealis*, as well as several other subspecies augment our breeding population in winter and during migration.

In Louisiana, Red-tailed Hawks nest primarily in pine woods regions and the northern portion of the state, but small numbers breed south roughly to the western I-10 corridor east to the Lafayette and Baton Rouge areas, and even as far as the Thibodaux area. Breeders are understandably absent from the coast and from the forested and flooded areas of the Atchafalaya Basin (where the habitat is not suitable), but the lack of breeding Red-taileds through most of the seemingly suitable southwestern Louisiana rice-growing region is more puzzling. In areas without nesting birds or where they are few, such as the rice country, lower Mississippi Valley, and coastal areas, fall migrants conspicuously appear beginning in late September. Winter residents are abundant from October through March.

Charlie Hohorst, Photographer

Bald Eagle Photographed by: Darlene Boucher

february 2008

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
JANUARY 27	28	29	30	31	1	2 GROUNDHOG DAY
3	4	5 MARDI GRAS	6	7	8	9 *Blooming Yellowtop fills the swamps with golden color*
10	11	12	13	14 VALENTINE'S DAY	15	16
17	18 PRESIDENT'S DAY	19	20 *LA. Winter Bird Atlas ends it's second season*	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29 LEAP DAY	MARCH 1

➤ *Bald Eagles typically achieve adult plumage (white head, white tail, brown body) at about 5½ years of age.*

➤ *Bald Eagles commonly "pirate" prey items from other raptors.*

➤ *Bald Eagles have lived up to 28 years in the wild and 36 years in captivity.*

Eagle Expo *Morgan City* **985-395-4905**

Bald Eagle
(*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)

Important to Native Americans as a spiritual or ceremonial symbol, the Bald Eagle is our national emblem and one of our most recognizable birds. It is the largest U.S. raptor (excluding the California Condor) and females are 25% larger than males. Our local breeding subspecies is the Southern Bald Eagle (*H. l. leucocephalus*), which occurs across much of the lower 48 states and is slightly smaller than its northern relatives.

Bald Eagles are patchily distributed throughout North America south to northern Mexico and Baja California. The current recovered population occupies most of the historical range and is approaching the historical abundance. In Louisiana, the species breeds primarily in the southeastern portion of the state in the vicinity of the larger river systems, lakes, and bays. Largest concentrations are in the Atchafalaya, Mississippi, and Pearl River basins. Smaller numbers occur to the north at Cypress Bayou Reservoir near Shreveport, in the vicinity of Lake D'Arbonne, in Morehouse Parish, and to the southwest along the Sabine River in Sabine and Calcasieu parishes. Northern breeding birds drift south in winter to take advantage of more resources and southern birds drift north in summer following winter nesting. Eagle movements are quite variable depending on population, pairs, or food resources. Eagles are diurnal migrants, and most flights occur during late morning to late afternoon when flight-assisting thermal updrafts are strongest.

Bald Eagles breed near bodies of water with abundant food fish resources. The large nest is placed in a tree—usually isolated from human disturbance. Live trees, especially bald cypress, are used, but dead trees are preferred. Bald Eagle nests, which are constructed of large sticks, are considered the largest among all birds. Nests are situated in a high crotch of the tree, and construction occurs one to three months before egg-laying. A nest is often reused year after year, and the immensity of some nests is the result of annual additions of material.

Charlie Hohorst, Photographer of Vignette

Red-shouldered Hawk Photographed by: Ronnie Gaubert

march 2008

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
FEBRUARY 24	25	26	27	28	29	1
2	3	4	5 ➤ *Most migrating Red-taileds have left the state.*	6	7	8
9 DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME BEGINS	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17 ST. PATRICK'S DAY	18	19	20 **Bayou Lafourche Paddle Trip** *Thibodaux* **800-259-0869** SPRING BEGINS	21 GOOD FRIDAY	22
23 **B.L.P.T.** EASTER	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

Red-shouldered Hawk
(*Buteo lineatus*)

This medium-sized *Buteo* is a year round resident of bottomland deciduous forest, woodlands, and swamps throughout much of the state, and represents the diurnal counterpart of the familiar Barred Owl. The species has a fairly high tolerance to disturbance, and will even nest in some well-wooded rural suburbs where human neighbors benefit from its predations on snakes, small mammals, and large insects. It is arguably the commonest of our breeding diurnal raptors. The Red-shouldered is also one of our more recognizable hawks due to the rather striking plumage of the adult and because it is relatively noisy and conspicuous. This is especially the case during spring when pairs are courting and defending their territories. On clear days, territorial birds will circle above the treetops giving loud series of '*cleeer-cleeer-cleeer*' calls as they intercept other raptors and escort them out of their airspace. In many areas, including Louisiana, this species is declining. During fall, winter, and spring, populations of our resident subspecies, the "Florida" Red-shouldered Hawk (*B. l. alleni*), are augmented by migratory individuals from farther north, including the nominate subspecies, "Northern" Red-shouldered Hawk (*B. l. lineatus*).

This North American raptor has a disjunct distribution, widely distributed in the eastern half of the U.S. and with an isolated resident population along the West Coast in California. Northern populations are migratory and spend the winter in the southeastern U.S. and northern Mexico. As a breeding bird in Louisiana, it is found throughout the state in wooded/riparian habitats but is generally absent from the coastal cheniers. It shares its woodland habitat and coexists with Barred Owls. During spring and fall, migrating northern breeders pass through the state, where some of these remain to winter in smaller woodlots, including chenier woodlands on the immediate coast. During fall migration, primarily during September through early November, this species can be observed moving solitarily, in small groups, and occasionally in kettles of Broad-winged Hawks.

Darlene Boucher, Photographer of Vignette

Swallow-tailed Kite Photographed by: Tim Vidrine

april 2008

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
MARCH 30	31	1 ➤ Swallow-tailed Kites arrive in Louisiana. ALL FOOLS' DAY	2		4 Audubon Country Expo *St. Francisville*	5
6 800-488-6502	7	8	9	10	11 The Great Louisiana Birdfest *Mandeville*	12
13 985 626-1238	14	15	16 *Peak blooming of Louisiana Irises*	17	18 Grand Isle Migratory Bird Celebration	19
20 800-259-0869 PASSOVER	21	22 EARTH DAY	23	24	25 LA. Ornithological Society Spring Meeting	26
27 LOS Spring Meeting	28	29	30 *Male alligators start to bellow in Louisiana marshes*	MAY 1	2	3

Swallow-tailed Kite
(Elanoides forficatus)

There are few sights in Louisiana as inspiring as that of one or more soaring Swallow-tailed Kites, gracefully circling above Spanish moss-laden cypress trees. Their striking black, blue-gray, and white plumage shimmers in the sun as they maneuver effortlessly over the forest canopy. From below, the white head, under-wing linings, and under parts sharply contrast with black-bordered wings and black tail. The combination of long, pointed wings, and the long, deeply forked "swallow" tail - used "scissors-like" for additional maneuvering precision - gives this species unexcelled aerial prowess. Unfortunately, their aerial skills do not protect these kites or their young from nocturnal attacks on their exposed treetop nests by Great Horned Owls, which have been recently implicated as a major kite predator. Swallow-tailed Kites nest in loose colonies and require large expanses of mature bottomland forest. The species' U.S. distribution has shriveled considerably from its historical limits, and numbers rapidly declined from the 1880's to 1940, most likely the result of deforestation, increased agriculture development, and direct persecution, e.g., shooting. Currently, there are at most a few thousand individuals scattered across seven southeastern states and, although not officially listed as Threatened or Endangered, this spectacular bird is at serious risk of further decline.

These kites are long distance migrants, moving south in fall overland to wintering areas in tropical South America. In spring they retrace their steps back north, although some will actually make over-water flights across the Gulf of Mexico. Amazingly, Swallow-tailed Kites regularly dine on dragonflies, which are masterful aerial acrobats in their own right. The insects are deftly plucked from mid-air as if they were stationary targets, and Swallow-taileds are just as skillful at detecting and seizing incredibly well-camouflaged snakes, lizards, and large insects from tree foliage.

Spring migrants arrive here during March and April, rarely by late February, and fall migrants head south from August to mid-September. In Louisiana, pairs are semi-colonial and occur primarily in the vicinity of the Sabine, Atchafalaya, Mississippi, and Pearl Rivers.

Greg Lavaty Photographer of Vignette

Mississippi Kite Photographed by: Brian Small

may 2008

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
APRIL 27	28	29	30	1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10 National Birding Day
11 MOTHER'S DAY	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26 MEMORIAL DAY	27	28	29	30	31

➤ *Mississippi Kites may swoop at humans who wander near their nests.*

➤ *Mississippi Kites begin nesting in Louisiana.*

National Birding Day

Neotropical Songbird Tour
Atchafalaya Basin Sherburne Wildlife Management Area
337-793-5529

Breeding Bird Surveys
conducted across Louisiana by dedicated volunteers
225-765-2823

Lacey Act signed into law on this day in 1900. The act aimed to restore bird species populations.

Mississippi Kite
(*Ictinia mississippiensis*)

Mississippi Kites are gregarious, and often forage in large groups as well as defend their territory from potential predators—large or small. They will nest in urban and suburban areas with established large trees. Kites soar effortlessly and buoyantly - maneuvering with ease - feeding primarily on insects such as dragonflies, which they catch in mid-air with their talons and then eat on the wing. With combination of pointed wings and long tail, small feet, short toes and sharp talons, Mississippi Kites are well equipped to pursue and capture aerial prey.

The Mississippi Kite breeds exclusively in the U.S., primarily in the southeastern and south-central states, with isolated pockets farther north, and even westward in desert riparian forest situations to New Mexico and Arizona. In Louisiana, the species is concentrated along major river drainages that still have expanses of the preferred bottomland hardwood/riparian habitats, especially the Red, Mississippi, Atchafalaya, and Pearl Rivers and their tributaries. They also inhabit well-wooded sections of cities and towns. Mississippi Kites are Neotropical migrants, breeding in the southern U.S. and overwintering in South America.

Mississippi Kites are classic "western circum-gulf fall migrants," first moving south towards the Gulf Coast and then west and south around the west side of the Gulf of Mexico. As with other diurnal raptors, the species migrates by day, and certain geographic features concentrate migrants into narrow corridors along the coast; one such "choke point" is near Veracruz, Mexico, where close to 200,000 Mississippi Kites are sometimes counted in a few weeks. Most have departed the U.S. by the end of September, a few lingering into October. These kites are long distance migrants, spending the winter as far south as Argentina and Paraguay.

Greg Lavaty Photographer of Vignette

Cooper's Hawk Photographed by: Bob Moul

June 2008

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
1 ➤ *"Blue Darter" is a folk name for the Cooper's Hawk.*	2	3	4 *Red-spotted Purple Butterflies peak in southern Louisiana*	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14 FLAG DAY
15 FATHER'S DAY	16 *Alligators begin building nests and laying eggs*	17	18	19	20 SUMMER BEGINS	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	JULY 1	2	3	4	5

Cooper's Hawk
(*Accipiter cooperi*)

The Cooper's Hawk, as with other members of the genus *Accipiter,* is primarily a bird hunting specialist. Hawks of this genus are built for maneuvering through forest during short aerial pursuits of birds, or ambushes of perched birds or small mammals. The relatively slim torso, short, broad, rounded wings, long, narrow tail, and long legs, toes, and talons combine to provide power, agility, and precision. As domesticated poultry proliferated across the continent, Cooper's Hawks would fearlessly and opportunistically help themselves to these unsuspecting domestic fowl. As a result, although the hawks didn't "know any better," Cooper's in particular earned the notorious nickname of "chicken hawk," and most other U.S. raptor species also became labeled as varmints.

A fair number of confirmed breeding records and increased numbers of sightings of adults throughout most of Louisiana during the late spring and summer months indicate that the species is expanding its breeding range in the state. Presumably, our local breeding population is resident, but this needs further study. Although Cooper's Hawks are still relatively scarce breeders in Louisiana, larger numbers pass through the state during migration or spend the winter here. This species prefers woodlands, both pine and hardwood, and has even been found nesting in *batture* woodland in the Mississippi River delta of lower Plaquemines Parish as well as in well-wooded suburbs of cities and towns. Southbound migrants typically start arriving in September and wintering birds and spring migrants disappear by early April.

Cooper's Hawks have voracious appetites and will consume the equivalent of 12% of their body weight daily. The diet consists primarily of birds, but small mammals are also taken. In Louisiana, Cooper's Hawks take a wide variety of bird species including Northern Cardinals and Mourning Doves. Some individuals even become a nuisance when they learn to "stake-out" bird feeding stations.

Greg Lavaty, Photographer of Vignette

Turkey Vulture Photographed by: Greg Lavaty

July 2008

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
June 29	30	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31	August 1	2

➤ *Unlike most birds, the Turkey Vulture uses its sense of smell to locate its food.*

INDEPENDENCE DAY

Migratory Bird Treaty Act signed into law on this day in 1918

➤ *Although their diet is largely carrion, vultures will sometimes catch, kill, and eat live prey.*

Feliciana Hummingbird Celebration
St. Francisville **800-488-6502**

Vultures

Black Vulture
(Coragyps atratus)

Turkey Vulture
(Cathartes aura)

Vultures are very social and family oriented. Communal nighttime roosts, usually consisting of one vulture species, make up an important social component of vulture life. These meeting places serve as information centers from which successful searches for carrion can be launched. From these perches, vultures often sit with wings spread. This behavior helps an all-dark bird regulate its body temperature. The underwings have relatively few feathers so that with the assistance of highly vascularized skin, a vulture can warm or cool itself, depending on weather conditions or whether it is facing away from or towards the sun.

Two species occur in the state, the Turkey Vulture and the Black Vulture. Turkey Vultures tend to prefer somewhat more open areas and are more solitary in nature, whereas Black Vultures prefer more wooded regions and are much more gregarious. But, there is much overlap between the two species and they often occur in the same areas and will feed together at the same carcass. Vultures are very common and have benefited from man's activities, especially road kills and garbage landfills.

Both species are widely distributed in the Americas. Turkey Vultures range from southern Canada and the U.S. south through much of South America. Northernmost populations are migratory. The Black Vulture also occurs throughout most of Mexico, Central America, and South America, but does not make it as far north in the U.S., occurring only in the southeastern and mid-Atlantic states and extreme southern Arizona. Both species are common residents in Louisiana and can be seen year round.

Brian Small. Photographer of Left Vignette
Greg Lavaty. Photographer of Right Vignette

Osprey Photographed by: Charlie Hohorst

august 2008

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
JULY 27	28	29	30	31	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24 / 31	25	26	27	28	29	30

➤ *In some areas, up to 95% of Osprey nests are built on man-made structures.*

Cloudless Sulphur Butterflies migrate into Louisiana

➤ *Ospreys typically eat fish but also take voles, squirrels, muskrats, and salamanders.*

Alligator eggs begin hatching

Osprey
(*Pandion haliaetus*)

Ospreys catch live fish by diving head first towards the water's surface and then bring the feet and talons forward in front of the head into striking position just before hitting the water. Prey is usually snagged near the surface, but sometimes the bird is entirely submerged for a moment before resurfacing and then laboring back into the air with its slippery quarry. Ospreys are able to extricate themselves from such situations, sometimes carrying a fish weighing in excess of half the bird's weight, thanks to the incredible lift afforded by their long, powerful wings. Fish are firmly gripped by the combination of long sharp talons, powerful feet/toes, and roughly textured "anti-slip" soles.

Ospreys occur nearly worldwide, anywhere that has suitable nesting sites near water: rivers, lakes, seacoasts, and other bodies of water. In the U.S. and Canada, it is primarily a 'northern species' ranging from Alaska across Canada and south into the northwestern and Great Lakes states; the species is patchily distributed elsewhere in North America, but there are major concentrations (due to more favorable habitat) in the Chesapeake Bay region, Florida, and Baja California. The majority of northern populations are migratory, and the more southerly populations are probably resident. Surprisingly, historically there were very few Osprey breeding records for Louisiana. But, as the species has rebounded in the U.S., it has also increased dramatically as a breeding bird, especially in southeast Louisiana and along some of the larger rivers and inland reservoirs. The species becomes more common and widespread in our state in winter and during spring and fall migration.

In Louisiana, Ospreys prefer to nest in tall trees, or use artificial platforms such as channel markers or utility poles. It is still a generally uncommon nesting species, occurring primarily along larger rivers, such as the Mississippi, Atchafalaya, and Red, and coastal river deltas and bays.

Charlie Hohorst Photographer of Vignette

American Kestrel Photographed by: Arthur Morris

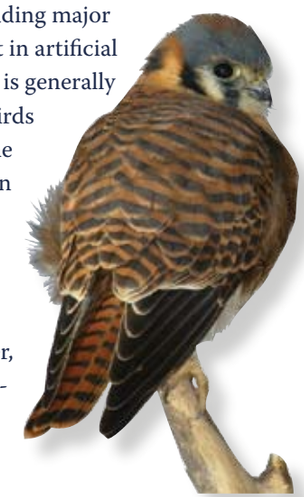
september 2008

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
AUGUST 31	1	2	3	4	5	6
➤ *Derived from its call, "Killy-Hawk" is a folk name for American Kestrel.*	LABOR DAY	RAMADAN				**Folsom Hummingbird Festival** *Folsom* **985-796-9309**
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
			➤ *American Kestrels begin showing up in Louisiana.*			
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
	AUTUMN BEGINS					**BTNEP's La Fete d'Ecologie** *Thibodaux* **800-259-0869**
28	29	30	OCTOBER 1	2	3	4
		ROSH HASHANAH				

American Kestrel
(*Falco sparverius*)

The American Kestrel is our smallest raptor, averaging only slightly smaller than the male Sharp-shinned Hawk. This is also arguably our most beautiful and colorful bird of prey. It has long narrow wings, a reddish brown back and long rusty tail, blue-gray cap, and two black marks down the side of the face, one in front, the other in back of the eye. The female is slightly larger than the male but somewhat less colorful. Males have bright bluish-gray wings and the brighter rusty-colored tail has a conspicuous black sub-terminal band and white tip. Additionally, the male has a buffy chest, the otherwise whitish under parts are delicately spotted with black, and the bluish crown has a rusty central patch. The female is whitish below and streaked with brown. The species' traditional American English name, "Sparrow Hawk," would seem to imply that it was a hawk rather than a falcon, and that it specialized on catching small birds. This, however, was a "double misnomer" because the species is actually a true falcon, and because insects, not birds, are the diet mainstay.

American Kestrels are broadly distributed across North America from southern Alaska and Canada south throughout most of the U.S. The species also occurs through the West Indies and from Mexico south to Argentina. Northernmost breeding populations are migratory and winter as far south as Panama. In Louisiana, the southern subspecies (*F. s. paulus*) is an uncommon breeder, primarily in the pine woods regions of the state. But, the occasional pair has been found nesting in other areas, including major cities, where they presumably nest in artificial cavities on bridges or buildings. It is generally unknown whether our breeding birds are sedentary because they become "lost" among the influx of northern birds (subspecies *F. s. sparverius*) that migrate through Louisiana or spend the winter here; these birds start filtering into the state in late August and early September, becoming more numerous by mid-September. Wintering individuals remain into April.



Arthur Morris Photographer of Vignette

Merlin Photographed by: Greg Lavaty

october 2008

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
SEPTEMBER 28	29	30	1	2	3	4
Wings over the Wetland activities each weekend of October at Jean Lafitte National Park and Preserve.						
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
➤ *Merlins begin showing up, particularly along the Louisiana coast.*				YOM KIPPUR		
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
	COLUMBUS DAY		*Raptor numbers peak in Louisiana as a result of migration.*			
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
					Louisiana Ornithological Society Fall Meeting	
26	27	28	29	30	31	NOVEMBER 1
LOS Fall Meeting			*Monarch Butterflies reach peak migration densities in south Louisiana*		HALLOWEEN	

Merlin
(*Falco columbarius*)

The Merlin's former American English name, "Pigeon Hawk," referred to its resemblance in size and shape to a pigeon, especially in flight, and not to its preferred prey. The Merlin is a relatively small falcon, about ten inches in length, with a wingspan of about two feet and weighing 5-6 ounces. Males and females are virtually identical in size. The male is bluish-slate above; the female is browner. The whitish under parts of both sexes are streaked (and barred on flanks) with dark brown; some individuals may have buffy under tail coverts. Distinctive white bands on an otherwise dark tail provides a good field mark separating Merlin from both Peregrine and American Kestrel.

Merlins occur across the Northern Hemisphere, breeding in the northernmost coniferous forests and mainly wintering in mid-latitude regions or, sometimes, even farther south. There are three North American subspecies, which are essentially dark, intermediate, and pale versions. The "Black Merlin" (*F. c. suckleyi*) breeds in the relatively "dark" and humid Pacific Northwest. The intermediate "Taiga Merlin" (*F. c. columbarius*) is the most widespread subspecies, breeding in the boreal and taiga forests from Alaska across Canada to the extreme northeastern U.S., and wintering from the western and southeastern U.S. and West Indies south through Central America to northwestern South America; most of the Merlins seen in Louisiana are this form. Only rarely encountered in Louisiana is the palest "Prairie Merlin" (*F. c. richardsoni*) which breeds in the prairie provinces and northern Great Plains states, and winters from the breeding range south through the central and western U.S. and into central Mexico. In Louisiana, the Merlin is decidedly uncommon, and is never found in the same densities of species such as American Kestrel or Red-tailed Hawk. Highest counts occur during fall and spring migration; smaller numbers remain through the winter. The best chance for encountering Merlins is on or near the coast because it is a traditional east-west raptor migration corridor, and food resources and preferred open habitats are relatively plentiful. However, the southwestern rice-growing region can also be productive in winter. The first fall migrants appear during September, and northbound spring migrants and wintering birds have usually departed the state by mid-late April.

Carl Sheely Photographer of Vignette

Peregrine Falcon Photographed by: Charlie Hohorst

november 2008

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
OCTOBER 26	27	28	29	30	31	1
2 DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME ENDS	3 ➤ *Peregrine Falcons sometimes hunt from tall buildings in Louisiana cities.*	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11 VETERAN'S DAY	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20 ➤ *Peregrine Falcon dive speeds can exceed 80 miles per hour.*	21	22
23 30	24	25	26	27 THANKSGIVING DAY	28	29

Peregrine Falcon
(*Falco peregrinus*)

Formerly known as the "Duck Hawk" in North America, and simply called "Peregrine" in the Old World, Peregrine Falcons are once again a fairly regular sight in Louisiana during migration and the winter months. But, not so long ago, North American Peregrines, like the Bald Eagle, were teetering on the verge of oblivion. Fairly soon after the pesticide DDT was put into use in the early 1940's, breeding populations plummeted and the species completely disappeared from some areas. Peregrines began a slow recovery after the banning of DDT. To further aid recovery, remaining Peregrine pairs received strict protection (many eyries were guarded) and a broader recovery plan involving both Canada and the U.S. was put into place. Release of captive-raised falcons further augmented wild populations. By 1998, most Peregrine populations had recovered significantly, prompting removal from the Endangered and Threatened lists.

The Peregrine Falcon has a nearly worldwide distribution, occurring almost everywhere except Antarctica and a few oceanic islands. Many of the populations are migratory and Peregrines occur in Louisiana principally as migrants or winter residents. There is only one breeding record for Louisiana- 11 May 1942, a pair nesting near Tallulah, LA in a dead tree, found by none other than Roger Tory Peterson! George H. Lowery, Jr., in his *Louisiana Birds* (1974) regarded this as the southernmost nesting record for the eastern U.S. The historical range of the Peregrine is poorly known and, perhaps prior to deforestation of the Mississippi Valley, this species may have been a regular nesting species. Perhaps some day Peregrines will once again breed in Louisiana.

In Louisiana, look for Peregrine Falcons from mid-September through April. Migrants can turn up almost anywhere, but most migrants and wintering individuals are found in the coastal and southwestern prairie regions where their preferred prey species are in greatest abundance. Peregrine Falcons are usually solitary but multiple individuals are sometimes seen during migratory movements or in areas with large concentrations of waterfowl and shorebird prey species.

Charlie Hohorst, Photographer of Vignette

Northern Harrier Photographed by: Gayle Clement

december 2008

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
NOVEMBER 30	1	2	3	4	5	6
➤ *Northern Harriers use their hearing to aid in location and capture of prey.*					HANUKKAH	
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
			➤ *Female Northern Harriers establish and defend territories while wintering in Louisiana.*			
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Christmas Bird Counts						
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
Christmas Bird Counts						
WINTER BEGINS				CHRISTMAS DAY		
28	29	30	31	JANUARY 1	2	3
Christmas Bird Counts						
			NEW YEAR'S EVE			

Northern Harrier
(*Circus cyaneus*)

Northern Harriers are a familiar sight cruising across a Louisiana winterscape of marshland or rice stubble. Harriers, although relatively common and widespread here on the wintering grounds, are generally wary birds and are almost always on the move, seen in flight and at a distance. Hence, to a certain extent they are overlooked, unappreciated, or taken for granted simply because they are so difficult to study "up close and personal."

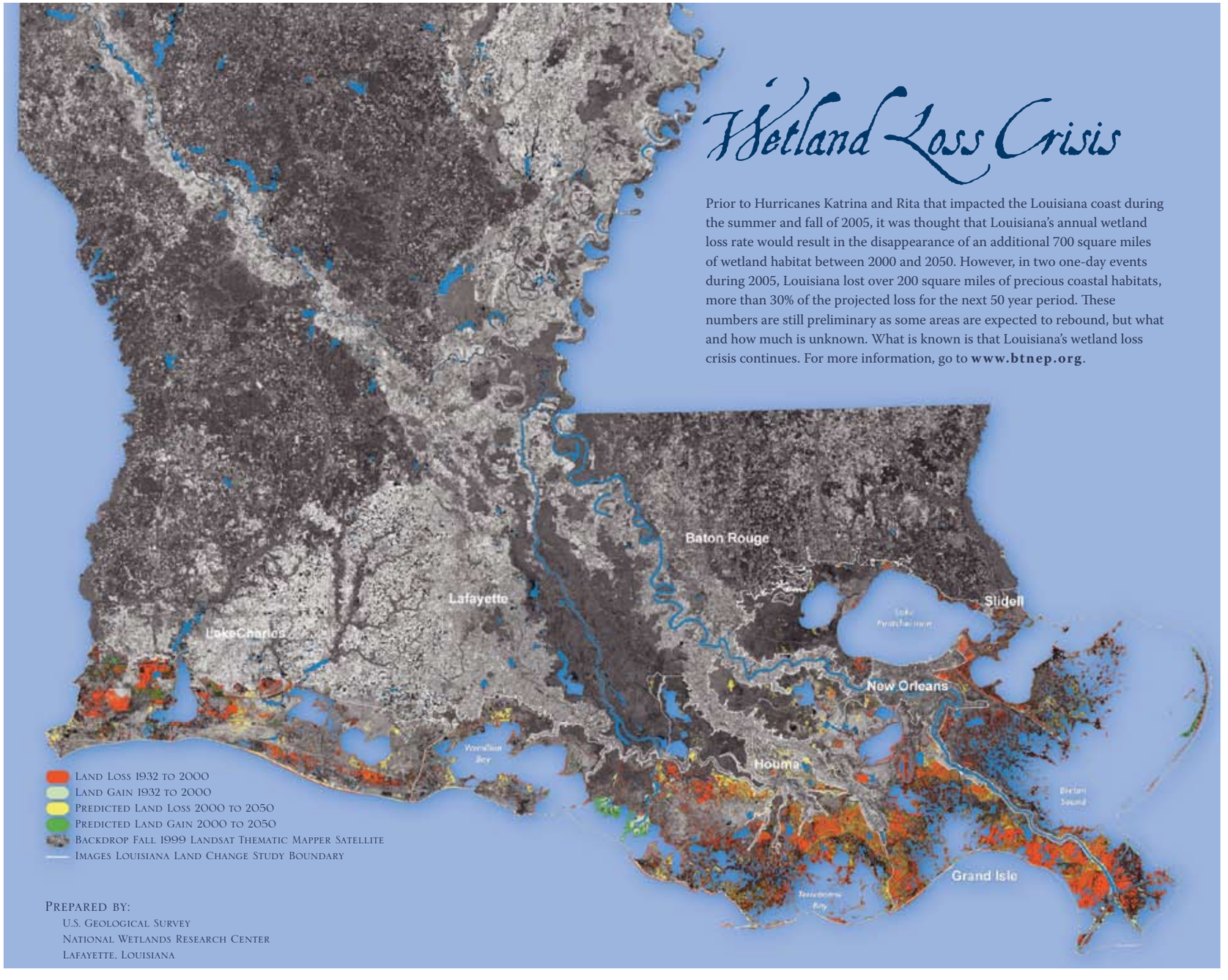
Formerly called the "Marsh Hawk" in North America, which captured the essence of the species as well as most common names, the name was eventually changed to conform to Old World terminology for this worldwide genus of hawks. Our Northern Harrier (subspecies *C. c. hudsonius*) is currently considered to belong to the same species as the Old World's Hen Harrier (subspecies *C. c. cyaneus*), but there are a number of important differences and the two may eventually be considered separate entities.

The Northern Harrier has a very large distribution in North America, breeding across most of Alaska and Canada south into much of the interior western U.S., the upper Great Plains, Great Lakes region, and northeastern U.S. to Virginia. The species also breeds locally on the Pacific slope south to northwestern Baja California and in the central U.S. to southern Texas. In winter, harriers occur from extreme southeastern Alaska and southwestern and southeastern Canada south across most of the lower forty-eight states; some harriers are long distance migrants, moving south of the U.S. as far as Panama and the northern West Indies. In Louisiana, Northern Harriers are common during migration and in winter, arriving in fall beginning in late August and departing in spring by the end of April. Coastal areas are very important to Northern Harriers and continuing loss of Louisiana's coastal wetlands is a potential threat to the welfare of our wintering populations. The harrier is listed on the National Audubon Society's "Blue List" of declining species.

John Spohrer, Photographer of Vignette

Wetland Loss Crisis

Prior to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita that impacted the Louisiana coast during the summer and fall of 2005, it was thought that Louisiana's annual wetland loss rate would result in the disappearance of an additional 700 square miles of wetland habitat between 2000 and 2050. However, in two one-day events during 2005, Louisiana lost over 200 square miles of precious coastal habitats, more than 30% of the projected loss for the next 50 year period. These numbers are still preliminary as some areas are expected to rebound, but what and how much is unknown. What is known is that Louisiana's wetland loss crisis continues. For more information, go to **www.btnep.org**.



Prepared by:
U.S. Geological Survey
National Wetlands Research Center
Lafayette, Louisiana

BTNEP
BARATARIA-TERREBONNE
NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM

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ConocoPhillips

Photographers of Raptors on the front cover clockwise from the left top: Swallow-tailed Kite—Tim Vidrine, Bald Eagle—Charlie Hohorst, Northern Harrier—Charlie Hohorst, Red-shouldered Hawk—Charlie Hohorst, Turkey Vulture—Greg Lavaty, Cooper's Hawk—Bob Moul, Peregrine Falcon—Charlie Hohorst, American Kestrel—Arthur Morris, Mississippi Kite—Brian Small, Red-tailed Hawk—Charlie Hohorst, Merlin—Carl Sheely, Osprey—Charlie Hohorst

Dear Birding Enthusiasts

The discovery of the abundant lands of Louisiana has led to the development of a culture, people and way of life like no other in the world. The vibrant history of the region is filled with amazing stories regarding the abundance of our natural resources.

As evident in the previous pages, Louisiana's habitats play an important role in sustaining many species of diurnal raptors. However, Louisiana's coastline and abundant natural habitats have changed considerably since its discovery. Due to human modification these changes have occurred more rapidly over the last 60 years. As such, Louisiana's citizens understand that these habitats must be restored in order for them to maintain our vast natural resources and the only way of life they know.

The Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program (BTNEP) also understands that rebuilding wetlands is vital to the future of Louisiana, and knows it is possible to do just that. Established in 1991, the mission of the BTNEP is the preservation and restoration of the Barataria-Terrebonne estuarine system, the 4.2 million acre region between the Atchafalaya and Mississippi Rivers. The BTNEP strives to rebuild and protect the estuary for future generations through the implementation of a science-based, consensus-driven plan that utilizes partnerships focused on the estuary's rich cultural, economic, and natural resources.

BTNEP is driven by the common desire to save a system and community infrastructure that is disappearing before our eyes. We wish to see a system capable of sustaining and protecting our homes, the places we work and play, and our way of life. We want these things for our children and grandchildren. We know wetland restoration can happen and that it will provide protection for Louisianans.

Our restoration plan, approved by the state of Louisiana and the federal government, is multifaceted and goes well beyond the mere creation of landmasses. It recognizes that a successful restoration plan must employ a rigorous monitoring program to apply adaptive management over the long term on a watershed level, have full community support, and be considerate of all elements of the ecosystem. A plan capable of implementation should address barrier islands, forested wetlands, shoreline habitats, natural chenier ridges, upland habitats, shellfish reefs, water quality, and fresh, brackish and saline marshes to ensure that all receive some level of restoration. However, we do recognize that changes are inevitable and must occur as restoration efforts progress. It is the magnitude of the changes resulting from coastal restoration efforts that must be applied with some caution and consideration for our current way of life.

In order to maintain the way of life of people in Louisiana and to still provide the economic and natural resources the rest of the nation relies on every day, a holistic approach to coastal restoration must be taken, like BTNEP took in the development of its restoration plan. Within this plan, small to medium water diversions are recommended, along with pipeline sediment delivery. The latter technique has been proven to work and should be at the top of the restoration "tool box" as one of the very few available methods to create wetlands from open water areas. It is a process that moves sediments harvested from existing deposits in river beds and offshore areas through an infrastructure of pipelines to rebuild and nourish wetlands and natural ridges. Only adding freshwater will protect the marshes we have now, but this is not enough to allow for a sustainable, human ecosystem. Our current condition calls for an urgent response to rebuilding our coastal landscape and that goes beyond merely sustaining what we have left.

Although Louisiana is losing wetlands faster than any other place on earth, there is still hope for the people, the culture, and the rich economic and natural resources. As history has proven, Louisiana provides a generous backdrop to a unique way of life. We still believe that restoration is possible. The planning has been completed and now wetlands must be rebuilt in our estuary – our home.

With warm regards,

Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program

"Although Louisiana is losing wetlands faster than any other place on earth, there is still hope for the people, the culture, and the rich economic and natural resources."

Greg Lavaty, Photographer

1. I-10 Eastbound Welcome Center
   337-589-7774
2. Sabine National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center
   337-762-3816

3. Southwest Louisiana Convention & Visitor Bureau
   337-436-9588
4. Rockefeller State Wildlife Refuge
   337-538-2276
5. Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge
   337-598-2216

6. Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters
   337-774-5923

7. Lafayette Convention & Visitors Commission
   337-232-3737
8. Acadiana Park Nature Station
   337-291-8448
9. Vermilion Parish Tourist Commission Visitor Center
   337-898-6600

10. Atchafalaya Welcome Center
    337-228-1094
11. Lake Fausse Pointe State Park Visitor Center
    888-677-7200
12. Iberia Parish Convention & Visitors Bureau
    888-942-3742
13. Tabasco® Pepper Sauce Factory
    337-365-8173

14. Cajun Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau
    Franklin, La 70538 • 337-828-2555
15. Cajun Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau
    Patterson, LA 70392 • 985-395-4905

16. Louis Armstrong International Airport
    Kenner, La 70062
17. New Orleans Metropolitan
    Convention & Visitors Bureau
    504-566-5011

18. Audubon Louisiana Nature Center
    504-861-2537
19. Audubon Aquarium of the Americas
    800-774-7394
20. Audubon Zoo
    866-487-2966

21. Houma Area Convention & Visitors Bureau
    985-868-2732
22. Wetlands Acadian Cultural Center
    985-448-1375
23. W.J. DeFelice Marine Center LUMCON
    985-537-5800
24. Lafourche Parish Tourist Commission
    985-537-5800

25. Grand Isle State Park Visitor Center
    985-787-2559
26. Grand Isle Tourist Information
    985-787-2997

27. Plaquemines Tourism Center
    Belle Chasse, La 70037 • 504-394-0018
28. Barataria Preserve Visitors Center Jean Lafitte
    504-589-2330

29. BREC's Baton Rouge Zoo
    225-775-3877
30. State Capitol Welcome Center
    225-342-7317
31. Tickfaw State Park Nature Center
    888-981-2020
32. Fontainebleau State Park
    888-677-6451
33. I-10 Slidell Welcome Center
    985-646-6451

For more information or a copy of an America's Wetland Birding Trail brochure, contact any of these locations.

BTNEP
BARATARIA-TERREBONNE NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM

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