

Broad-winged Hawk *Buteo platypterus*



Folk Name: Creek Hawk, Broad-winged Buzzard

Status: Breeder

Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Deciduous forests

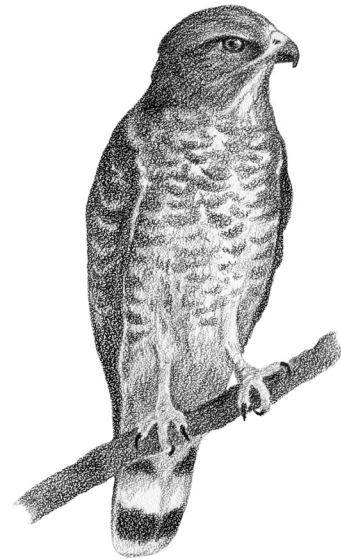
The Broad-winged Hawk is the smallest and most secretive of our three breeding buteos.

At 15 inches in length, it averages about 2–3 inches smaller than the Red-shouldered Hawk and about 4–7 inches smaller than the Red-tailed Hawk. In addition to its small size, it differs from the Red-shouldered Hawk by lacking any red on its shoulders, and its terminal tail bands are broad, black-and-white bands of equal width, whereas the tail bands of the Red-shouldered alternate between thick black and narrow white bands.

The Broad-winged Hawk is strictly a woodland bird, and it is easily overlooked. Unless a person is actively searching for it, they may never notice it. During the breeding season, this hawk is best located by its distinctive call which is very unlike the calls of its relatives. The Broad-winged Hawk issues a high-pitched, plaintive whistle, instead of a loud, harsh, scream.

Zenus Porter, the renowned late nineteenth century “hawk hunter” of Sharon township near Charlotte, called this small buteo “the creek hawk.” He described it as being a bird of local creeks and swamps that often fed on frogs, tadpoles, fish, and turtles. Recent studies show it eats mostly small mammals, amphibians, birds, reptiles, and also a variety of insects.

The nest of a Broad-winged Hawk is notoriously difficult to find. It is built of sticks and is generally set in the crook of the top branches of a tall broad-leaved tree in the middle of a dense patch of continuous forest, often on a dry slope or upland. As such, this hawk’s eggs are seldom seen, and they were once of great value to



J F M A M J J A S O N D

collectors. During the heyday of oological collecting in the late 1800s, a single Broad-winged Hawk egg could fetch a price of \$4, while the eggs of the other buteos sold for only about \$0.20 each. Despite this economic pressure, these eggs were so hard to acquire that these birds were not over exploited, which regrettably was the fate of many other bird species at that time.

The Broad-winged Hawk is a neotropical migrant that is found in our region from April through early October. A few show up in late March. Pete Worthington sighted one in Cleveland County on March 24, 1989, and Linda Safir reported one on the same date in Charlotte in 2006. Tom Sanders reported seeing a group of five migrating over Charlotte “lined up very high riding the favorable wind due north” on March 25, 2010. Julian Meadows



Broad-winged Hawk banded and released by the Carolina Raptor Center. (Phil Fowler)



Broad-winged Hawk on a nest—always a challenge to see. (Phil Fowler)

reported a Broad-winged Hawk arriving in Charlotte on March 26, 1961. Occasionally, individuals may linger into late October. Danny Swicegood reported one soaring over Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge on the late date of October 26, 1999.

It is possible this species is a casual winter vagrant or an accidental winter visitor here. We have about half a dozen reports of Broad-winged Hawks seen in the region from November through February, and several of these were reported by very experienced observers. Unfortunately, none are supported by a photograph or other physical evidence. Future reports of this species in the winter should be submitted with photographs and very detailed notes.

In the spring these birds move northward through this region either individually or in relatively small groups. While breeding, they are solitary birds. However, every fall these hawks join together and move south en masse from their North American breeding sites to spend the winter in southern Mexico and Central and South America. Broad-winged Hawks are renowned for their spectacular fall migration along the foothills and mountains of North Carolina and over the Blue Ridge escarpment into South Carolina. Thousands of Broad-winged Hawks can be observed taking advantage of rising thermals of warm air that allow them to gain altitude which allows them to soar almost effortlessly southward for hundreds of miles each day.

Hawk Watch stations are manned by volunteer observers at many mountain sites each fall and each collects annual data on the movement and numbers of migrating raptors. The bulk of the Broad-Winged Hawks generally move through the Carolinas between 20 September and the first week of October. Some of our mountain stations have counted over 5,000 Broad-winged Hawks passing over in a single day. These southbound migrants become less numerous as one moves east away from the mountains and into the Foothills and Piedmont.

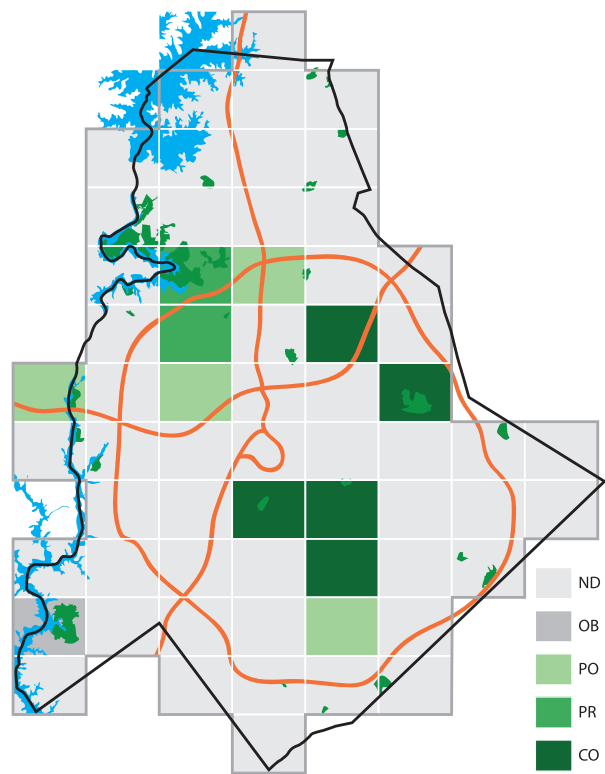
In Catawba County, Park Rangers reported a remarkable encounter with a large flock of Broad-winged Hawks at Riverbend Park on September 27, 2013. The birds had apparently settled down there the night before. In the morning, they began to lift off, forming small "kettles" and then lifted high into the sky. A total of 852 hawks rose up out of the trees over a period of about 45 minutes, forming about 20 kettles. Ranger Dwayne Martin called it "one of the most amazing things I have ever seen" and wrote "I don't think I will ever forget this morning!" Over 1,000 Broad-winged Hawks have been tallied in a single fall season at Riverbend Park in Catawba County, while fewer than 500 have been counted migrating through in a single fall season at the Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge monitoring site located just 30 miles away to the southeast.

The Broad-winged Hawk is considered a "spotty" nesting species in the South Carolina Piedmont, and it is believed to be an uncommon nesting bird in the western

Piedmont of North Carolina. Frank Brown provided the earliest confirmation of nesting in our region. He discovered the nest of a Broad-winged Hawk in Iredell County, just above the Mecklenburg County line on May 3, 1932. The nest was "40 ft. up in main crotch of hickory on rather heavily wooded, gently sloping hillside, and about 200 ft. from stream. Contained 3 eggs which had probably incubated a week or more." He located another Broad-winged Hawk nest "35 ft. up in an oak" two weeks later on May 17, 1932, this time in Mecklenburg County. Elizabeth Clarkson reported a Broad-winged Hawk nest with eggs in Mecklenburg County on May 3, 1941.

South Carolina ornithologist John Cely found a possible breeding pair at the Sandhills State Forest in Chesterfield County on June 10, 1983, and Doug McNair found "several pairs" in the county in the summer of 1985. In *The South Carolina Breeding Bird Atlas*, published in 2003, Cely reported probable breeding in Spartanburg, Cherokee, Union, York, and Lancaster counties, as well as possible breeding in Chester County and confirmed breeding in Kershaw County. Dwayne Martin reported two pairs breeding at Riverbend Park in Catawba County since 2000, with one of those pairs nesting for "at least 10 years."

These secretive birds may be more common nesting in the region than these few confirmed field records indicate. A review of intake records from the Carolina Raptor Center reveals hatchling, or hatch-year birds, have



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Local (PR/2, CO/5)

been received during breeding season from every county in this region except for Lancaster and Chester counties. For most, the cause was listed as “orphaned” or “fell from nest.” If birders search thoroughly, they should expect to find this hawk breeding in every county in and around the Central Carolina region.

Volunteers confirmed nesting in five survey blocks in Mecklenburg County during the Breeding Bird Atlas survey. Linda Safir observed successful nesting of Broad-winged Hawks for three consecutive years in the Cotswold neighborhood of Charlotte. One nest was well hidden at the top of a tall sweetgum tree in a small copse

of woods in a yard at the end of a dead-end street. The pair successfully raised one to three young each year. In 2014, Safir reported watching the young Broad-winged Hawks begging for food and described the begging of the young as sounding “so desperate and pitiful, it makes me want to DO something for them!” Phil and Jan Fowler photographed a Broad-winged Hawk on its nest near the Mallard Creek Greenway in east Charlotte in the spring of 2014. The nest was hidden so well in the dense foliage that the bird could scarcely be seen in the photograph. An active Red-shouldered Hawk nest was less than 300 yards away.