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[\(/bow/species\)](/bow/species)

[Accipitriformes](#) [Accipitridae\(/bow/species/accipi1/cur/introduction\)](/bow/species/accipi1/cur/introduction) [Buteo\(/bow/species/accipi1/cur/species#genusButeo\)](/bow/species/accipi1/cur/species#genusButeo)

[\(/bow/species/surprise-me\)](/bow/species/surprise-me)

[\(/bow/species/whthaw1/cur/breeding\)](/bow/species/whthaw1/cur/breeding)

[\(/bow/species/galhaw1/cur/breeding\)](/bow/species/galhaw1/cur/breeding)

SPECIES

Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni*

Marc J. Bechard, C. Stuart Houston, Jose H. Saransola, and A. Sidney England

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▼ [Account navigation](#)

[Introduction \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/introduction\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/introduction)

[Appearance \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/appearance\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/appearance)

[Systematics \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/systematics\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/systematics)

[Distribution \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/distribution\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/distribution)

[Habitat \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/habitat\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/habitat)

[Movements and Migration \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/movement\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/movement)

[Diet and Foraging \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/foodhabits\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/foodhabits)

[Sounds and Vocal Behavior \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/sounds\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/sounds)

[Behavior \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/behavior\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/behavior)

[Breeding \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/breeding\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/breeding)

[Phenology](#)

[Nest Site](#)

[Nest](#)

[Eggs](#)

[Incubation](#)

[Hatching](#)

[Young Birds](#)

[Parental Care](#)

[Cooperative Breeding](#)

[Brood Parasitism](#)

[Fledgling Stage](#)

[Immature Stage](#)

[Demography and Populations \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/demography\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/demography)

[Conservation and Management \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/conservation\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/conservation)

[Priorities for Future Research \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/priorities\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/priorities)

[Acknowledgments \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/acknowledgments\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/acknowledgments)

[About the Author\(s\) \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/aboutauthors\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/aboutauthors)

[Multimedia \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/multimedia?media=photos\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/multimedia?media=photos)

[Tables and Appendices \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/appendices\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/appendices)

[Revision History \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/history\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/history)

[References \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references)

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Breeding

Phenology

Pair Formation

Initiation of pair-bonding begins upon return to breeding grounds, Apr in colder part of range but early Mar in central California. Aerial courtship displays (see Behavior: sexual behavior, above) performed with decreasing intensity and frequency as breeding season progresses. No information on possible initiation of pair bonds on

wintering grounds or during migration, and no documented interchange of banded birds between regional populations.

Nest-Building

Begins within 7–15 d of arrival and usually lasts about 1 wk. Most nest-building occurs during first 4 h of daylight (Fitzner 1978 (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990>)).

First/Only Brood Per Season

Figure 5 (<https://cdn.download.ams.birds.cornell.edu/api/v1/asset/25019391>). Egg-laying through fledging lasted about 73 d in a single nest and 99–110 d for the entire population ($n = 36$; Olendorff 1973 (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF57538>)). In se. Washington, clutches initiated within 7–14 d of arrival on breeding grounds and in first 4 h of morning (Fitzner 1978 (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990>)). Initiation dates vary latitudinally and locally with little synchrony. Earliest laying dates (early Mar–late Apr) occur in Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas (Bent 1937b (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF23961>), Bednarz 1988a (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF12037>)). Most clutches completed by mid-Apr in Central Valley, CA (Estep 1989 (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20989>)). Initiation dates in ne. California, Oregon, Washington, Kansas, and Colorado are variable (late Apr–late May), with differences of up to 25 d occurring between adjacent pairs (Woodbridge 1987 (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF35523>)). In British Columbia and Saskatchewan, clutches are started from late May through mid-Jun (Bent 1937b (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF23961>), CSH). Eggs hatch 34–35 d later. Nestlings fledge on average at 43 d of age (range 38–46; Olendorff 1973 (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF57538>), Fitzner 1978 (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990>), Woodbridge 1987 (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF35523>)). Fledging date averages 18 Aug in ne. California (Woodbridge 1987 (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF35523>)), 1 Jul–mid-Aug in central California (Estep 1989 (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20989>)), and mid-Jul–mid-Aug in Colorado (Olendorff 1973 (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF57538>)). In Washington, 15 Jul reported to be earliest fledging date; 25 Jul–5 Aug more typical (Fitzner 1978 (</bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990>)). Most nestlings fledge during first 2 wk of Aug near Kindersley, Saskatchewan (CSH).

Nest Site

Selection Process

Both members of pair participate in nest initiation. Male selects nest site; not known if female plays role in selection. Once the site is determined, nest-building is usually completed in about 1 wk but occasionally takes ≤ 2 wk (Fitzner 1976).

Microhabitat

No information.

Site Characteristics

Typically a solitary tree, bush, small grove, or line of trees along stream course. Typical nest trees include willows, black locusts (*Robinia pseudoacacia*), box elders (*Acer negundo*), junipers (*Juniperus* spp.), oaks (*Quercus* spp.), aspens, and cottonwoods. In Cimarron Co., OK, 71% of nests were in Siberian elms planted around homesteads (McConnell et al. 2008 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF49151](#))). Small number of nests reported on human-built structures such as power poles or transmission towers (Olendorff et al. 1981 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF10299](#)), James 1992b ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF35518](#))). Nest appears more flimsy or ragged than that of other buteos; can be any height but is usually near top of tree, within crown on small limb. Sites frequently attributable to human activity, such as shelterbelts (Olendorff 1973 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF57538](#))). Favors agricultural areas, including irrigated alfalfa fields (Woodbridge 1987 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF35523](#))), wheat fields (Bechard et al. 1990 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF9576](#))), and fields planted with row crops (Estep 1989 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20989](#)), England et al. 1995 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF35517](#))).

In the Regina plain, Saskatchewan, nests were surrounded significantly more by grassland and trees and less wheatland (Groskorth 1995 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF49144](#))). In N. Dakota, pasture and haylands are predominant type of land within 1 km of occupied nests (Gilmer and Stewart 1984 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF49117](#))). In extreme s. Arizona, 41 nests in mesquite (*Prosopis* spp.) bushes 1–5 m above ground (Bendire 1892b ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF9625](#))). Urban pairs in central California prefer conifers; 79% in Davis ($n = 14$) and 94% in Stockton ($n = 17$) (England et al. 1995 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF35517](#))). Nest trees in se. Washington significantly closer to human habitations than nest trees of Ferruginous Hawks (mean 4,806 m \pm 713 SE vs. 2,524 m \pm 383 SE, $p < 0.001$; Bechard et al. 1990 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF9576](#))). In 1997, 27 nests were found on decommissioned telephone-line poles on the White Sands Missile Range in sw. New Mexico, usually where two vertical poles supported four paired sets of cross arms (Brubaker et al. 2003 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF29140](#))).

Nest

Construction Process

Both members of pair build or refurbish nest. In Washington, nest construction begins 7–15 d after arrival and requires 1–2 wk to complete (Fitzner 1978 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990](#))). Male brings most nesting materials and does most construction. Both sexes bring green sprigs.

Structure And Composition Matter

Typical raptor nest: bulky, unsightly mass of sticks. Constructed of various freshly broken sticks, twigs, and debris (<1 cm diameter). Sometimes baling wire, rope, and pieces of farm equipment incorporated, but less frequently than in nests of Ferruginous Hawks (CSH). Lining consists of fresh leafy twigs from nest tree, grass or hay, weed stalks and bark, but rarely cow dung ([Bent 1937b \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF23961\)](#), [Fitzner 1978 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990\)](#), [Palmer 1988g \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF21003\)](#)). Nests in Montana consisted of sticks combined with materials such as sagebrush (*Artemisia* spp.), wild rose (*Rosa* spp.) brambles, and cottonwood twigs, with elaborate linings consisting of fresh leaves, green weeds, and wool ([Cameron 1913 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF49114\)](#)). Frequently uses Russian thistle (*Salsola kali*) in nests ([Fitzner 1978 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990\)](#)), which results in frail nest susceptible to damage by high winds (CSH). In se. Alberta, nests contained leaves (50%), forbs (40%), dung (<1%), and sod (10%), but none contained bark, as did nests of Ferruginous and Red-tailed hawks ([Schmutz et al. 1980 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF56116\)](#)).

Dimensions

Outside diameter usually about 60 cm; inner bowl up to 20 cm wide and 6–7 cm deep ([Palmer 1988g \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF21003\)](#)). Mean nest depth 32 cm (range 10–122, $n = 89$; [Schmutz et al. 1980 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF56116\)](#)). Depth of bowl decreases as flattened by nestlings.

Microclimate

Semiexposed; nests below tree canopy. Tends to nest toward top of tree and toward tips of smaller branches, making nests vulnerable to windthrow and rain.

Maintenance Or Reuse Of Nests, Alternate Nests; Nonbreeding Nests

Some nests used for ≥ 1 yr by same pair. More than 50% of nests in Washington, N. Dakota, and Saskatchewan were freshly built; remainder were refurbished nests of Swainson's Hawk, Black-billed Magpie (*Pica pica*), American Crow, and Common Raven ([Fitzner 1978 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990\)](#), [Gilmer and Stewart 1984 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF49117\)](#), CSH). Unlike Red-tailed and Ferruginous hawks, which refurbish several nests in a particular year, Swainson's Hawk does not build > 1 nest/yr, but if the first clutch is destroyed or the nest blown down, a new nest may be built nearby ([Sharp 1902 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF21053\)](#), D. Zazelenchuk, pers. comm.).

Eggs

Shape

Short subelliptical to elliptical ([Bent 1937b \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF23961\)](#), [Harrison 1979b \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF33740\)](#)).

Size

Length x breadth (mm): 57.1 (range 51.5–60.0) x 44.4 (range 41.2–46.7), $n = 54$ eggs in 20 clutches; Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology [WFVZ]). Similar averages reported by Reed ([Reed 1904 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF9601\)](#)), Bent ([Bent 1937b \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF23961\)](#)), Schonwetter ([Schönwetter 1961 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF19198\)](#)), and Bechard and Houston ([Bechard and Houston 1984b \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF57315\)](#)).

Mass

Average weight at various stages of incubation 54.9 g ($n = 7$; [Olendorff 1973 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF57538\)](#)).

Color

Approximately 20% plain (off-white) or nearly so; others irregularly or sparsely marked with dark reddish brown or pale purplish blotches around larger end ([Reed 1904 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF9601\)](#), [Harrison 1979b \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF33740\)](#), [Palmer 1988g \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF21003\)](#)).

Surface Texture

Smooth or finely granulated ([Palmer 1988g \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF21003\)](#)).

Eggshell Thickness

From WFVZ ($n = 20$ clutches, 54 eggs): pre-1950 mean empty shell weight 5.37 g (range 4.79–5.90); mean shell thickness 0.400 mm (range 0.370–0.437). In California, pre-1945 mean eggshell thickness 0.402 mm \pm 0.032 SD ($n = 50$); 1979–1983 thickness 0.385 mm \pm 0.028 SD ($n = 14$; [Risebrough et al. 1989 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF21008\)](#)). In Columbia River Basin of Oregon, pre-1947 mean eggshell thickness 0.428 mm \pm 0.005 SE ($n = 31$); 1976–1980 thickness 0.387 mm \pm 0.007 SE ($n = 35$; [Henny and Kaiser 1979 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF49120\)](#), [Henny et al. 1984a \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF29106\)](#)). This 4% thinning had no measurable impact on breeding success. Low amounts of eggshell thinning correlate with predominantly insect diet in raptors ([Newton 1979c \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF10652\)](#)). For more detailed discussion, see Conservation and management: effects of human activity, below.

Clutch Size

See Demography and populations: measures of breeding activity: clutch, below.

Egg-Laying

Occurs at approximately 2-d intervals, with laying usually in morning hours ([Fitzner 1978 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990\)](#)). In Wyoming, no evidence of re-laying after clutches destroyed ([Dunkle 1977 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF11202\)](#)), but in Colorado, 1 instance of re-laying 14–16 d after a nest was destroyed ([Olendorff 1973 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF57538\)](#)). No data on how likelihood of re-laying varies with nest phenology at time of nest destruction.

Incubation

Onset Of Broodiness And Incubation In Relation To Laying

Begins with first egg laid.

Incubation Period

Initially estimated to be 28 d ([Bent 1937b \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF23961\)](#), [Brown and Amadon 1968 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF9577\)](#)), but now known to be 34–35 d ([Olendorff 1973 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF57538\)](#), [Fitzner 1978 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990\)](#)).

Parental Behavior

Female does nearly all incubation; male covers eggs only while female feeds away from nest for brief periods during day. In Washington, female stays in nest during most of incubation period, and male provides her with food. During food transfers, male sometimes brings food directly to nest, but female typically flies to intercept prey from male; then consumes it away from nest. During absence of female, male assumes same incubation posture but keeps lower profile on nest, resting head on edge of nest. Female generally returns to nest within 10 min, but absences of 30 min are not uncommon. Female absences also associated with preening, collection of nesting material, and defecation. Neither male nor female observed defecating from nest; instead, they fly to perches > 100 m away to defecate ([Fitzner 1978 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990\)](#)).

Hatching

Takes 2–4 d ([Fitzner 1978 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990\)](#)); pipping to hatching lasts 1–2 d. At two 3-egg nests, all eggs were laid at approximately 2-d intervals but the last egg hatched 1 and 3 d after the first egg; at a 4-egg nest the first egg was laid 1 d before the second, the subsequent eggs were laid at 2-d intervals but the last egg hatched only 3 d after the first ([Fitzner 1978 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990\)](#)).

Young Birds

Condition At Hatching

Altricial and nidicolous. Hatchlings unable to raise head; lie limp for first few hours after hatching. Average weight at hatching is 39.4 g ([Olendorff 1974b \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF60758\)](#)).

Growth And Development

Young inactive for first 8–10 d ([Fitzner 1978 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990\)](#)); all activity during this period associated with feeding. Able to stand on feet at 13–17 d of age; prior to this, crawl on tarsi. First signs of sibling aggression at 27–30 d, when young begin tearing food apart themselves. Primaries first emerge at 9–11 d; tail feathers at 14–15 d ([Fitzner 1978 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990\)](#)). Gain

in body mass is sigmoidal; growth of 7th primary is near linear (Parker 1976a ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF21004](#))). Details on growth of young provided in Olendorff 1974b ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF60758](#)), Parker 1976a ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF21004](#)), and Bechard 1983 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20979](#)).

Fratricide

Possible and confirmed records of fratricide (Parker Parker 1976a ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF21004](#)), Parker 1979b ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF49129](#)), Pilz and Seibert 1978 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF21005](#))). In 4-yr study in se. Washington, high nestling mortality occurred when young were 15–30 d old. Not always evident whether deaths of nestlings resulted from starvation or from fratricide, but bloody heads of live birds indicated the latter to be common cause of death. Partially eaten young, always the youngest or youngest 2 nestlings in brood of 3, found at 10 of 16 nests in 1978 and 15 of 26 nests in 1979 (Bechard 1983 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20979](#))). Fratricide may be related to food availability, but ultimate cause remains unknown (Bechard 1983 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20979](#))).

Parental Care

Brooding

From Fitzner 1978 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990](#)), se. Washington. Mostly by female, who broods during daylight hours for about 9 d. On first day after hatching, broods 78% of daylight hours, <10% on day 9. Female broods at night until young are 17–22 d old. At this age, she continues nest attentiveness, but behavior shifts from brooding to shading nestlings, especially on hot, sunny days.

Feeding

Male provides most of the food for female and brood, but female hunts more frequently as nestlings grow. Adults pick apart prey brought to nest and present it piece by piece to young; each feeding takes about 10 min and seldom exceeds 15 min ($n = 3$ nests observed; Fitzner 1978 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990](#))). Feeding frequency peaks at 10–15 d, gradually decreases prior to fledging (Fitzner 1978 ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990](#))). Young first feed themselves at 23–26 d of age, but female periodically feeds young until 27–32 d old. When prey are scarce and nestlings only 2–4 wk old, adults may hunt at such a distance that neither one responds to humans when nests are disturbed (Houston and Schmutz 1995a ([/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF49123](#))).

Nest Sanitation

Young usually eject feces over edge of nest. Adults add fresh vegetation to nest bowl during incubation and early stages of brood development (MJB).

Parental Carrying Of Young

Not reported.

Cooperative Breeding

Sometimes 3 individuals seen at nests, but mating status has not been determined. In ne. California, 1 subadult male acted as nest helper, provisioning young at nest attended by adult pair ([Woodbridge et al. 1995a \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF49136\)](#)). Three adults at single nests in s. Alberta during 2 different breeding seasons may have been breeding pair and helper, or polygyny ([Cash 1989 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20984\)](#)).

In ne. California, polyandry observed in small proportion of territories monitored between 1984 and 1995 (B. Woodbridge pers. comm.). Both males copulated with female, contributed to nest-building, and provisioned young. Most polyandrous trios together only 1–2 yr, but 1 territory was occupied by a polyandrous trio for 8 consecutive years; during this time the female and 1 male were replaced by new adults.

Brood Parasitism by Other Species

Not known to occur.

Fledgling Stage

Departure From The Nest

Young first exercise wings when 29–33 d old ([Fitzner 1978 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990\)](#)). Nestlings venture onto limbs that support nests at 27–33 d. Young quickly adapt to branches and then spend little time on nest. First flight at 38–46 d. For first 7–10 d after first flight, young stay near nest and fly only to chase adults carrying prey. By 10 d after fledging, young can be as far as 1 km from nest.

Association With Parents Or Other Young

In se. Washington, juveniles associate with parent birds for average of 29.2 d (range 22–38 d) after fledging and remain within the adult territory during entire postfledging period, largely dependent on adults for food ($n = 13$; [Fitzner 1978 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990\)](#)).

Ability To Get Around, Feed, And Care For Self

During first 2 wk after first flight, fledglings use range of $<2 \text{ km}^2$ ([Fitzner 1978 \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/references#REF20990\)](#)); area affected by availability and homogeneity of perching structures. If perches are scarce, young simply use the few perches available and do not move much. In central California, 6 fledglings fitted with radio transmitters stayed within 1.0 km of nest for approximately 2 wk after first flight and were provisioned by adults (J. A. Estep pers. comm.). At 11–20 d after first flight, they left nesting

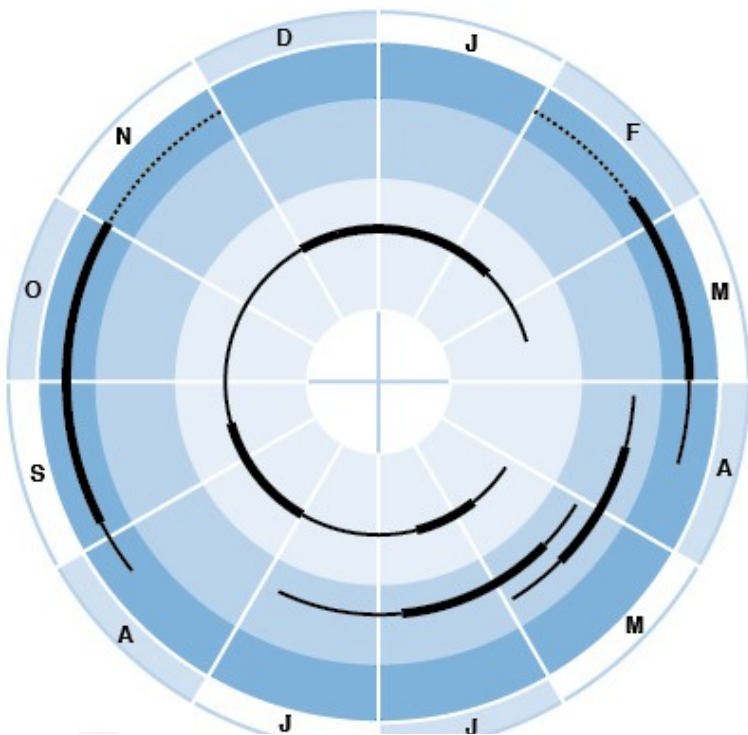
territory, did not return, and could be 1.5–240 km from nest. During this time, fledglings can travel 80–160 km/d, typically forming groups of 8–30, but up to as many as 150 juveniles. Once they left nesting areas, they did not appear to be provisioned by adults.

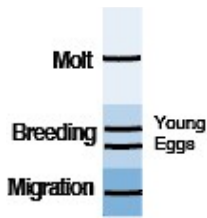
Immature Stage

Little known; needs study. On departure for migration, adults and young separate and juveniles depart alone.

◀ [Behavior \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/behavior\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/behavior)

[Demography and Populations \(/bow/species/swahaw/cur/demography\)](/bow/species/swahaw/cur/demography) ▶





(<https://cdn.download.ams.birds.cornell.edu/api/v1/asset/25019391>).

Figure 5. Annual cycle of breeding, migration, and molt of Swainson's Hawk

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Sacramento Valley, CA (J. A. Estep and K. W. Babcock pers. comm.). Thick lines show peak activity, thin lines off-peak. Dotted lines indicated presumed migration to and from Central and South America. Molt indicates rectrices and remiges only.



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(<https://cdn.download.ams.birds.cornell.edu/api/v1/asset/24958251>).

Swainson's Hawk nesting habitat, Gackle, ND, July.

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Swainson's Hawks are birds of open country, typically soaring and hovering in strong wings in search of prey. They frequently nest in isolated trees that dot the prairie. Visit this photographer's photo galleries [here \(http://www.briansullivanphotography.com\)](http://www.briansullivanphotography.com).





(<https://cdn.download.ams.birds.cornell.edu/api/v1/asset/24928921>).

Adult Swainson's Hawk on nest, Minot, ND, 19

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June.

Swainson's Hawks nest in a variety of open habitat, often in isolated trees but also in shelter belts, as is the case here. They build bulky stick nests often clearly visible in the crowns of trees. Visit this photographer's photo galleries [here \(http://www.briansullivanphotography.com/\)](http://www.briansullivanphotography.com/).





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**Nestling Swainson's Hawks, Pawnee National
Grasslands, CO, 7 July.**

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This species typically nests in an isolated tree -- in a field or along a stream course. See Breeding: nest site for details. ; photographer Ernesto Scott



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(<https://cdn.download.ams.birds.cornell.edu/api/v1/asset/24936611>).

Immature Swainson's Hawk stooping on prey, Firebaugh, CA, June.

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Swainson's Hawks typically hunt rodents by hovering high over a field, and then plummeting to earth with talons extended. Visit this photographer's photo galleries [here \(http://www.briansullivanphotography.com/\)](http://www.briansullivanphotography.com/).

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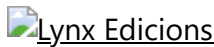
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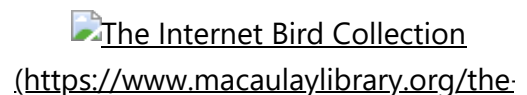


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