

# Red-tailed Hawk

## *Buteo jamaicensis*

Our most widely distributed breeding hawk, Red-taileds were encountered in 722 priority blocks during the Atlas Project. Recorded from every county, they were fairly uniformly distributed across each physiographic region from a low of 90.5% of the Lake Plain priority blocks to 97.8% of the blocks in the Illinoian Till Plain. Their relative abundance on Breeding Bird Survey routes exhibits a similar pattern, as Red-taileds were most numerous within the Illinoian Till Plain. However, since these Breeding Bird Surveys are performed during the early morning hours when hawks are least active, Red-taileds may not be accurately censused by these surveys and their actual relative abundance within Ohio's physiographic regions may be different.

Their widespread distribution reflects the abundance of suitable habitats within the state. Red-taileds are occupants of semi-open habitats, preferring a mosaic of farmlands and small woodlots liberally sprinkled with isolated tall trees, wooded fencerows, utility poles, and other convenient perches. They also exhibit a preference for drier upland habitats over wet bottomlands. While their greatest numbers may occur in Ohio's open farmlands, this species has proven to be fairly adaptable. Red-taileds may occupy suburban and urban areas, hunting along highways, vacant lots, and even capturing birds at backyard bird feeders. These urban Red-taileds may nest along riparian corridors or other undisturbed locations (Palmer 1988). They will also inhabit heavily forested areas where utility lines and highways provide suitable foraging sites.

Red-tailed Hawks have not always been so numerous within Ohio. They were heavily persecuted during the first decades of this century which significantly reduced their statewide abundance. Hicks (1935) cited breeding records from 83 counties, noting they were uncommon to rare and locally distributed in most counties. These hawks were apparently least numerous in western Ohio. For example, Campbell (1940) noted only two nests and one additional sighting from the Toledo area. They were also considered to be rare summer residents in the Dayton area and Paulding County (Mathena et al. 1984, Price 1934b).

While the numbers of Red-taileds slowly improved during the 1940s, they remained rare in many western counties. Kemsies and Randle (1953) cited only two nesting records from the Cincinnati area through the early 1950s. The greatest expansion in their statewide populations occurred after the mid-1950s, a trend that was evident through the 1970s (Robbins, C. S., et al. 1986).

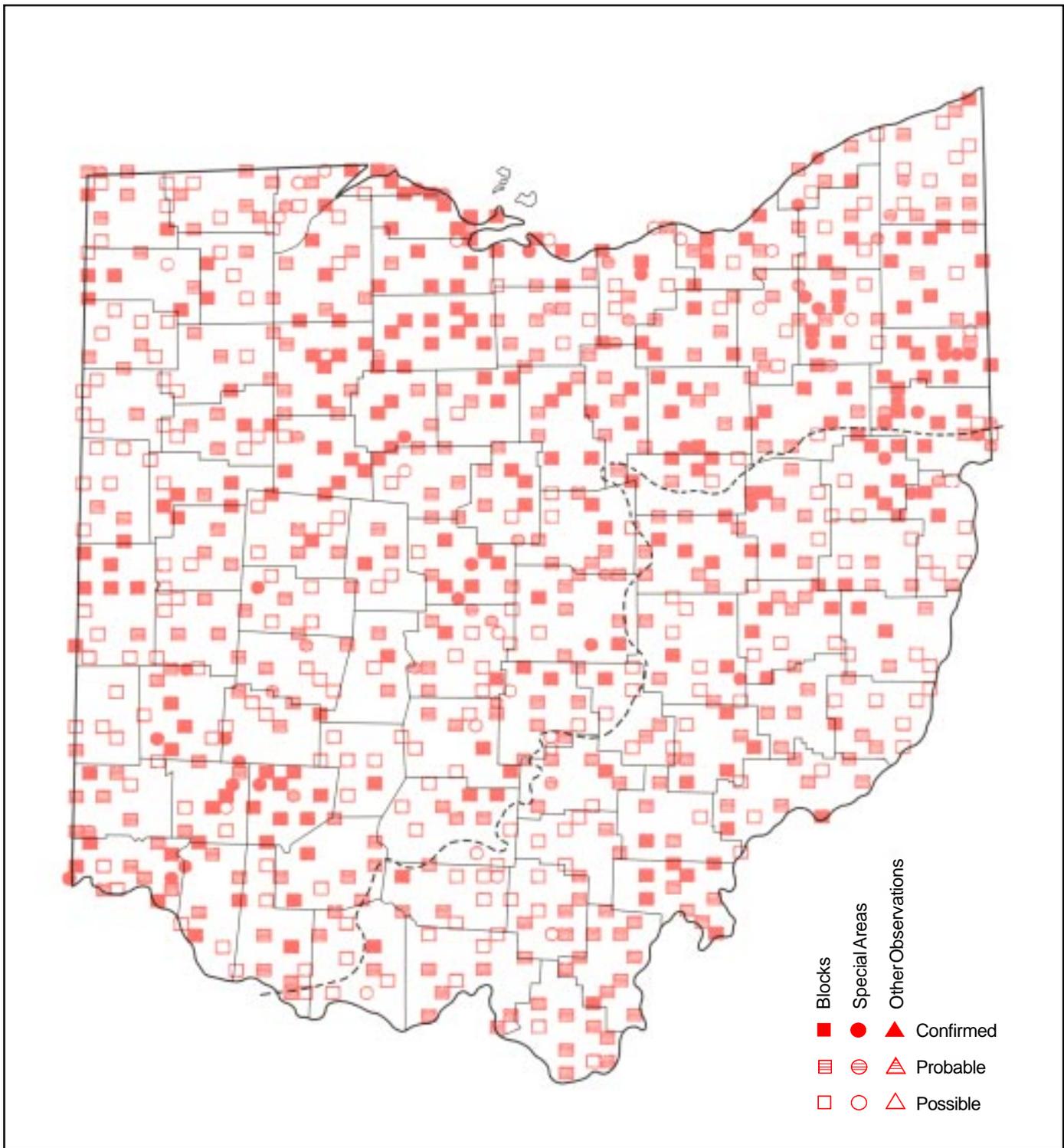
Unless the habitats are altered, breeding Red-tailed Hawks tend to occupy the same territories each year. An average territory size is approximately 2.2 square miles (Palmer 1988). Some pairs evidently build new nests each year, while others may reoccupy the same nest for a number of years. Their nests may be located within large tracts of forest, small woodlots, along fencerows, and even in isolated trees in the middle of large fields, but the common factor at every location is isolation from

disturbance and the presence of suitable large trees. Their nests are normally placed near the crowns of these trees, and become prominent features of the fall and winter landscape after the trees lose their leaves. Since their nests are easy to locate, breeding confirmation for Red-taileds proved to be relatively easy to obtain during the Atlas Project. Of the 234 confirmed records (32.4%), 152 pertained to active or used nests. Recently fledged young or adults carrying food for young comprised most of the other confirmed records. Probable breeding status was indicated in 278 priority blocks (38.5%). Perched or flying adults that did not exhibit any territorial behavior were given possible status in 210 blocks (29.1%), although some of these records may have pertained to nonbreeding individuals.



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In Ohio, nest construction activities may begin during any warm mid-winter day. However, these activities are most prominent during late February and March. The first eggs may be laid by March 10–20, but most adults are incubating clutches during April. Renesting attempts are responsible for nests with eggs through May 31 (Campbell 1968). After an incubation period of 34 days (Palmer 1988), young Red-taileds may hatch between mid-April and the first week of June. The first fledglings may appear during the second half of May, but most are noted between June 10 and July 15. They may remain with their parents for an additional one or two months, and the screams of begging young Red-taileds may be heard across Ohio well into August.



**Analysis of Block Data by Physiographic Region**

Physiographic Region	Total Blocks Surveyed	Blocks with Data	% with Data	Regional % for Ohio	Ave. # Individ per BBS Route (1982–1987)
Lake Plain	95	86	90.5	11.9	0.6
Till Plain	271	255	94.1	35.3	0.7
Ill. Till Plain	46	45	97.8	6.2	1.3
Glaciated Plateau	140	134	95.7	18.6	0.4
Unglaciated Plateau	212	202	95.3	28.0	0.4

**Summary of Breeding Status**

No. of Blocks in Which Species Recorded		
<b>Total</b>	<b>722</b>	<b>94.5%</b>
Confirmed	234	32.4%
Probable	278	38.5%
Possible	210	29.1%