



WHAT IS A RAPTOR?

“Raptor” is another name for a bird of prey, which includes hawks, falcons, owls, vultures, eagles, ospreys, condors and kites. In Latin raptor means, “to grasp or seize,” which describes how this bird group captures food. This method of securing its prey is made possible by the long claws (called talons) on the end of each toe.

WHAT DO RAPTORS EAT?

Raptors eat, or prey upon a variety of other animals, such as mammals, insects, snakes, fish, amphibians and even other birds. Most raptors capture their prey live, making them predators. Vultures and condors eat carrion; animals that have died from other causes. Raptors assist in maintaining the balance of nature by helping to control troublesome pest populations, such as mice and rats. Vultures and condors control the spread of disease by eating carrion.

Hawks are divided into 2 groups. **Buteos** are soaring birds with broad tails and wings. The red-tailed hawk is an example of a buteo. **Accipiters** have short rounded wings and very long tails. They are deep woods raptors that eat other birds. The cooper's hawk is an example of an accipiter.

Falcons are birds with long pointed wings, and large feet compared to body size. They live and hunt in open country and eat other birds, insects and small rodents. The most recognizable member of this group is the peregrine falcon.

Vultures and **condors** are also raptors but have weak, chicken-like feet. They eat primarily carrion and search for their food from the air; sometimes alone, often in groups. Only 2 species live in the United States; the turkey vulture and the black vulture. Vultures are the only group of raptors that have a sense of smell.

Owls are truly unique creatures, active primarily at night. More myths exist about this group of raptors than any other. Their habits and behaviors make them an important part of the ecosystem. Excellent hearing, the ability to see in limited light, camouflage coloring and silent flight make them very efficient predators.

Ospreys are often called fish hawks. They live near water and feed primarily on fish. They have double-jointed wings which enable them to take off while partially submerged. They are the only member of the family Pandionidae.

Kites are very graceful fliers and appear falcon-like in silhouette. The mississippi, swallow-tailed, black-shouldered, and everglade kites are the only 4 species that nest in the United States.

Eagles are quite easily recognized because of their immense size. Two species nest in the United States; the **bald eagle** and the **golden eagle**. The golden eagle inhabits the western United States with a small population in the Appalachian Mountains. The bald eagle, our national symbol, is unfortunately an endangered species.

WHAT MAKES A RAPTOR A RAPTOR?

Most raptors use their **strong feet** to capture and kill their prey. All raptors use their **hooked upper beak** to tear prey into small, easily swallowed pieces. All raptors have **eyesight** that is unequalled in the animal world. Their eyes have the ability to pick out even the smallest movement of prey from very great distances. If an eagle could read it would be able to read the fine print of a newspaper from 100 yards away. That's the length of a football field!!

A fun way to find out just how good a raptor's eyesight is can be done with a small, shiny object, a yardstick and a pocket calculator. Take a shiny new dime and push it into the thick bark of a large tree (this won't hurt the tree) so it can't fall. Walk away from the dime until you can just barely see it. Then use the yardstick to measure the distance back to the tree the dime is on. Take your calculator and multiply the distance by 9. The number you get is the distance a raptor would be able to see the dime from.