

California Raptor Center – Raptor Facts & Vocabulary

“Raptor” is a word we use to describe a group of predatory birds that are not necessarily closely related, but share a method of getting food. These birds capture and kill animals, including other birds, using their feet and sharp beaks. All birds have feathers, hollow bones, and keen senses, but raptors also have: 1. Talons and feet that are extremely powerful; 2. beaks that are strong, hooked, and sharply pointed for ripping and tearing food; and 3. excellent eyesight.

Types of raptors in Northern California:

1. Falcons (Order Falconiformes)
2. Eagles, Hawks, and their kin (Order Accipitriformes)
3. Owls (Order Strigiformes)
4. Vultures and Condors (Order Accipitriformes or Cathartiformes)

Types of Raptor

Accipiter – An agile, long-tailed hawk with short, rounded wings for maneuvering through trees.

Buteo – A large soaring hawk with broad wings and broad tail, hunting mostly in open areas.

Condor – Diurnal (daytime) scavenger, a large vulture. The largest raptor in North America. After captive breeding saved these birds from extinction, California Condors have been released in selected sites in the west.

Falcon – Fast, streamlined raptor with long, pointed wings, large eyes, and vertical facial stripes.

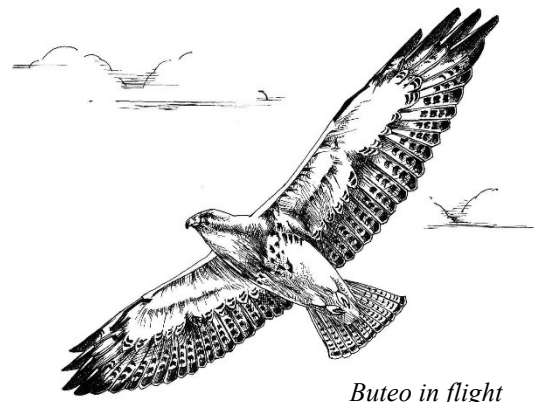
Harrier – Slim raptor of the grasslands, with long, narrow wings, long tail, and modified facial disk.

Hawk – Diurnal raptor with strong, curved talons and a sharp, hooked beak. Includes accipiters & buteos.

Kite – Graceful small, white raptor of the California Central Valley and foothills. The White-tailed Kite is often seen hovering while hunting.

Osprey – A fish-hunting hawk found almost worldwide near rivers, coasts, and lakes. The Osprey is the sole member of its taxonomic family, the Pandionidae.

Owl – A raptor with a large round head, usually with large eyes and a facial disk. Owls can be active at any time (nocturnal, diurnal, crepuscular), depending on geographical location, hunting style, and



Buteo in flight



Falcon at rest

availability of prey, but most are adapted to hunting in dim light.

Vulture – Diurnal scavenger. Vultures are excellent soaring birds. The Turkey Vulture alone among US raptors has an acute sense of smell.

Anatomy and Physiology

Beak – The mouthpart of a bird. In raptors, it is sharp, curved, and strong, for tearing food.

Binocular vision – Ability to focus with two eyes to give depth perception and good judgment of distance and speed. Not all birds have binocular vision, but all raptors do, even owls.

Camouflage – A color pattern that allows a creature to hide by blending in with its background.

Crop – Pouch-like area of the esophagus that holds food. Hawks, falcons, vultures have crops and use them to store food temporarily. Owls do not have crops.

Ear tufts – Feathers (not ears!) on the heads of some owls.

Facial disk – Feathers around the face of owls and harriers. They help focus sound, allowing the bird to determine the direction of a sound.

Feathers – Unique covering of birds (and long ago, of some dinosaurs). They are vital to flight and help in temperature control, protection, display, and camouflage.

Nictitating membrane – a transparent third eyelid that cleans, moistens, and protects the eye.

Talons – Strong, curved claws used for catching, holding, and killing prey.

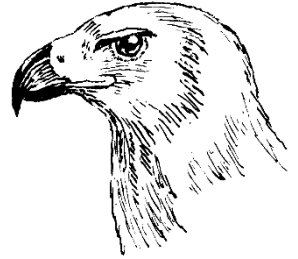
Behavior

Crepuscular – Active in dim light, especially at dawn and dusk.

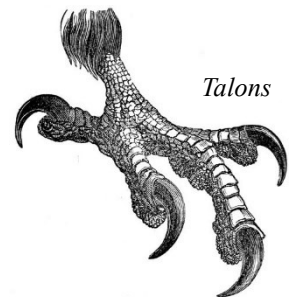
Diurnal – Active during the day.

Imprinting – A form of rapid learning that occurs during a brief receptive period, typically soon after birth or hatching, and establishes a long-lasting behavioral response to a specific individual or object. Young birds identify with and bond to the creature they experience on first focusing their eyes, 10 to 16 days after hatching. Usually this is a parent, so normal imprinting ensures that young birds will obtain food, protection, and proper socialization. Imprinting on humans who find and feed youngsters can

Raptorial beak



Ear tufts and facial disk



Talons

permanently alter their social development. Such a raptor cannot be released to the wild.

Nocturnal – Active during the night.

Pellet – A ball of fur, feathers, sometimes bones, insect wings, and other undigested material, coughed up by all meat-eating birds (including non-raptorial species like crows and herons).

Predator – Hunter of other animals for food.

Prey – Animal that is hunted for food.