

[From Winter 1993 - 1994]

Be on the Lookout: Red Barons are in the Sky!

Raptors, birds of prey such as hawks and owls, are exciting birds to observe on Assateague Island. Because they are hunters, raptors have special adaptations, or tools, to help them get their food. This makes them particularly fun to watch.

When you see a red-tailed hawk soaring around high in the air, it may seem impossible for it to be able to see a small mammal on the ground. But a hawk's eyesight is 8-10 times better than humans, which enables it to spot its prey at great distances. The eyes of night-hunting, or nocturnal, hunters are special in a different way. Many owls have very large eyes to let in as much light as possible to help them see in the dark.

The word raptor is derived from the Latin word *rapere*, which means "to seize" in Greek. Raptors use their feet, or talons, to do just that. Their talons have four claws and are very strong to enable them to grasp and kill their prey. Falcons use their talons in a different way. They kill their food by making "fists" and swooping down from above to knock down a small bird with an explosion of feathers from the sky.

Two endangered raptors often seen in this area during the fall migration are the bald eagle and the peregrine falcon. During the autumn, peregrine falcons are usually more common. However, recently bald eagles have been sighted more often than usual. For the first time in the history of the refuge, a pair of bald eagles has been building a nest here! Bald eagles mate for life and will tend to use the same nest yearly, which makes the prospect of having a pair here truly incredible. Be sure to be on the lookout for a bald eagle with its large dark body and white head soaring in the sky.

Another raptor commonly seen in the area in the summer is the osprey which will often nest on poles or channel markers in the bay. The northern harrier can be seen hovering above the marsh grasses looking for small vertebrates to eat. This bird is easily identified by the white patch of feathers on its rump. Frequently, a turkey vulture with its featherless red head can be seen soaring in the sky looking for carrion. Great horned owls nest on the island, but being nocturnal, they're harder to observe. To find one, look around the bottom of trees for the wet bundles of feathers and bones, or pellets, they cough up after a meal.

As you spend time on the island, look up during the day and listen for the hoot of the great horned owl at night. Maybe you'll catch a glimpse of one of these amazing feathered hunters in action.

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