

Harris Hawk (*Parabuteo unicinctus*)



Photo by Elizabeth
Cheri Heimbach's Harris Walker



Photo by Lee

Physical Description:

These are large hawks with long tails and broad wings. Harris's hawks range in length from 18 to 23 inches (46 to 76 cm) and have wingspans of 40 to 47 inches (100 to 120 cm). Adult plumage is uniformly chocolate brown with distinct reddish shoulders, upper and underwing coverts, and leg feathers. The tail is dark with white upper and undertail coverts and a white base and terminal band. Juveniles are similar to adults but are less distinctly colored and have a white belly with chocolate brown streaking. The tarsal feathers are pale with reddish barring and there is barring on the tail and wings. Females weigh an average of 1,047 grams, and males are smaller, weighing an average of 735 grams.

Identification:

- Length: 18 inches Wingspan: 43 inches
- Sexes similar
- Large, long-tailed, broad-winged hawk
- Short, dark, hooked beak with yellow cere
- White uppertail coverts

Adult:

- Chocolate-brown head, neck, back, and belly
- Chestnut underwing coverts and leg feathers
- Dark flight feathers above and below
- Chestnut upperwing has dark centers to many of the feathers
- White undertail coverts
- Black tail with white base and terminal band

Immature:

- Chocolate-brown head and neck with sparse pale streaking
- White belly streaked with chocolate-brown
- Leg feathers pale with chestnut barring

- Upperwing and underwing coverts chestnut, with dark centers to many of the feathers
- Pale bases to primaries create pale patch in outer wing
- Dark tail with narrow white base and terminal band

Hunting Strategies:

The Harris Hawk is the only North American raptor known to hunt in groups, and has been observed cooperatively hunting and rearing young. Harris hawks will go so far as to perch upon one another in hunting scenarios, sometimes in stacks of three birds! Interestingly, no birds ever seem to get hurt using this odd method.

Stealth approach and pouncing, flushes after ambush, and relay attacks are the most common hunting strategies employed by individuals and groups.

The diet of Harris' hawks is versatile and varies with prey availability. These hawks feed mostly on small mammals such as rats and mice, but also take birds and lizards. They commonly hunt in groups of about five hawks, increasing their success rate and enabling them to take larger prey such as cottontails and jack rabbits. These hunting groups consist of a breeding pair and other helpers, with the female dominating. They are fast flyers and once they have spotted their prey, they land and take turns trying to scare and actually flush the prey animal until it darts from beneath its hiding place. Another member of the hunting group captures the animal and assumes a posture known as mantling, in which the hawk shields the prey with its wings to hide it from other birds. It has been suggested that group hunting is encouraged by the dense brush and thorny nature of their habitat. There is some evidence that these hawks may feed on carrion if food availability is low.

Use in Falconry:

The Harris Hawk, (referred to by some as the Bay Winged Hawk) is the most widely used bird in falconry. This is in part due to its social and intelligent nature, which makes it amenable to training and captive breeding.

The advent of Harris hawks as falconry birds precipitated major changes in hunting methodology for falconers. Pole hawking, and hawking groups of birds are innovations directly related to the rise of the Harris Hawk as a falconry bird.

More energetic than a Redtail, and more amicable than a Goshawk, the popularity of the Harris Hawk is understandable; it combines versatility, trainability and power.

Habitat/Range/Ecology:

Harris' hawks can be found in semi-open habitats in the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico, from Baja California to southern Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, extending south through Central and South America to Chile and just into Patagonia.

Harris' hawks are found in various habitats, from upland desert dominated by saguaros to mesquite, palo verde, and ironwood woodlands in the Colorado River valley. There is a population of hawks being reintroduced to the Colorado River that prefer to nest near water in mequite, willows and cottonwoods. In urban areas, they are seen utilizing washes, open lots, and open desert. These hawks may be found at elevations of 400 to 1,000 meters.

Harris' hawks establish and defend territories that range from 0.2 to 5.5 square kilometers in size. Territory size depends on the availability of food and other resources.

Production:

Most often, social groups of Harris' hawks contain a single monogamous breeding pair. However, these hawks are known to practice simultaneous polyandry, where more than one male mates with one female and shares in the responsibilities of raising offspring. Polyandry is commonly found in areas where the habitat quality is rich as opposed to arid habitats where the chances of reproductive success are less, even when there are three adults hunting. It is also found to be common in Arizona where the sex ratio is significantly skewed towards males, in comparison with areas such as Texas, where the sex ratio is not as skewed.

Harris' hawks build their nests in saguaros, palo verdes and mesquite trees at an average height of 5 meters. In urban areas, nests can be found on cottonwoods, ironwoods, palm trees and

electrical towers. Nests are platforms made of sticks, weeds, twigs, and are usually lined with soft mosses, grasses and roots. Between two and four eggs are laid at a time. Females have the ability to breed all year long and can lay two to three clutches within a year. The incubation period lasts about 35 days and the males often share duties with the female during this period. Fledging occurs after another 40 days. The young birds tend to stay around the nest area for two to three months longer.

Both the female and the male contribute to parental care. Harris' hawks practice cooperative breeding, with several birds helping with building nests, incubation, feeding, and defense. This assistance increases nest success. There is often a trio consisting of two males and a female which aid in the nest cycle.

Breeding interval: Harris' hawks breed two to three times per year.

Breeding season: Harris' hawks breed year round.

Eggs per season: 3-5 to 9-15; avg. 6

Time to hatching: 33 to 37 days; avg. 35 days

Time to fledging: 35 to 45 days; avg. 40 days

Time to independence: 2-3 months (average)

Lifespan / Longevity:

Records on longevity are collected from the Bird Banding Laboratory (BBL) in Laurel, Maryland. The maximum longevity record for Harris' hawks is 14 years, 11 months.

Behavior:

Harris' hawks are non-migratory and diurnal. They form complex social groups, which aid in the nesting cycle. Most often these groups are trios consisting of two males and a female, but groups of four or five hawks are not uncommon. There is a strict dominance hierarchy within groups of Harris' hawks. The breeding, or alpha, female, is dominant to all other hawks in the group. Occasionally there is a second female who is subordinate to the alpha female but dominant to all other males in the group. The breeding, or alpha, male is dominant to all other males in the group. Commonly the group contains a beta male, who may attempt, often unsuccessfully, to mate with the alpha female. Finally, there may be several gamma birds, which are subordinate to the alpha and beta individuals. These gamma birds may be either male or female, and usually they are sexually immature individuals. Often they are the juvenile offspring of the alpha pair. All members of the group help with obtaining food, defending the breeding territory, and providing nest protection. These groups also hunt cooperatively. They are able to depend on much larger prey when hunting in groups. This aspect of group hunting and food sharing increases survival rates for birds as individuals.