

# Species Sheets: Rough-legged Hawk

photo by Kate Davis ©



**Common name:** Rough-legged Hawk

**Latin Name:** *Buteo lagopus*

**Field Marks:** Length 22 inches  
Wing span 56 inches



**L**arge wintertime hawk. Many plumage variations between young and old, male and female. Generally young and adult female have dark belly band. Adult male dark chest and lighter below. All have white at base of tail and dark tip. In flight, show dark wrist patches on wings. Called “rough-legged” because feathers extend all way down to toes. Scientific name *lagopus* means “hare foot”. Hare like the rabbit relative.

## Habitat:

Open country fields and marshes. Easily spotted on telephone poles and fence posts.

## Behavior:

Feeds on 90% small mammals, lemmings in the north then voles in winter. Voles are small rodents like mice. Use vantage point to find prey rather than soar like Red-tail because thermals don't occur in cold winter weather. Sometimes hover like a huge, slow-winged hummingbird over fields looking for food.

## Nest and eggs:

Nest in northern tundra where there are no trees. Build bulky stick nests lined with grass, hair and feathers

on cliffs and sometimes hill slopes. Eggs 3-5 in number and may be as many as 7 when lemming numbers are high. More food available means more young.

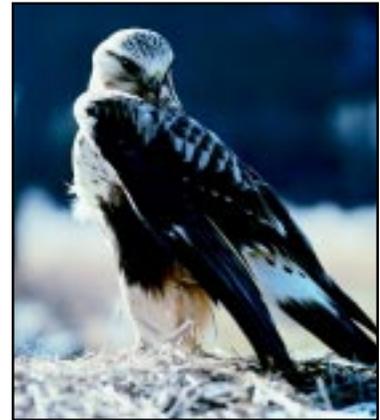
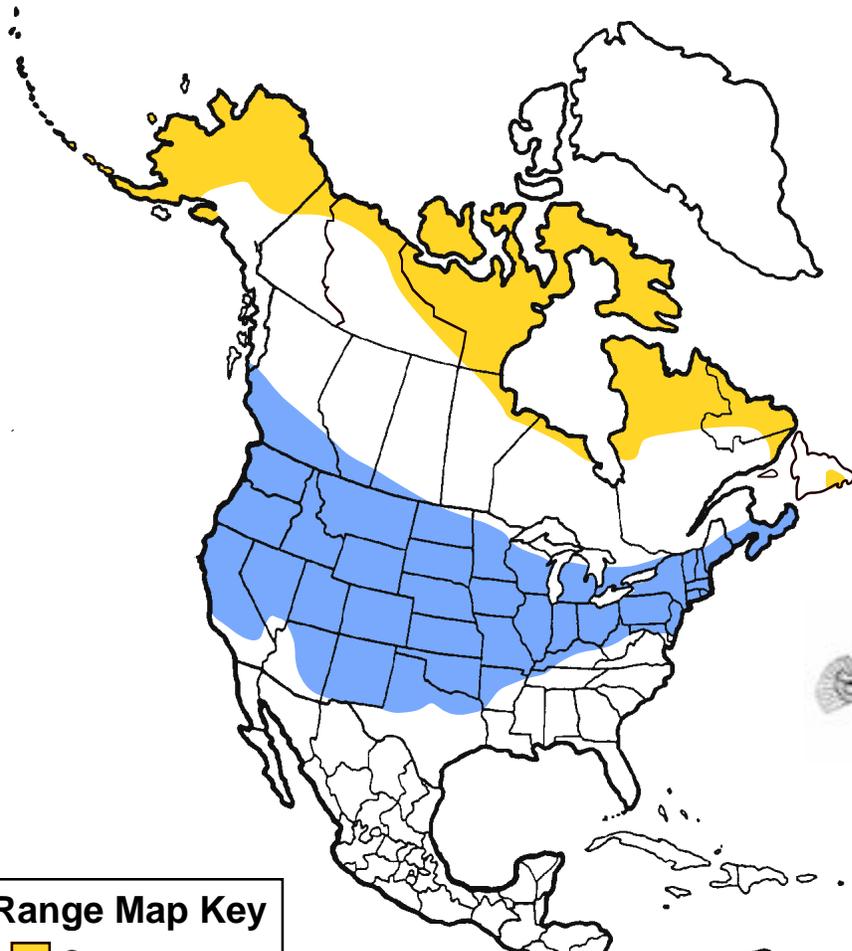
## Movement:

Entire population of these arctic tundra breeders move in to lower U.S. for the winter. Migrate in valleys and not as high in the altitude as many other hawks. Many Red-tailed Hawks leave the area in the winter, so Rough-legs replace them with a similar diet. In Europe and Asia this same species is called a Buzzard which really refers to a buteo hawk and not a vulture.

## Interesting Fact:

In winter Rough-legs may communally roost, or spend the nights in one place in groups numbering from many to several hundred. This may be safety in numbers. Or it may be that birds congregate in areas that offer warmer temperatures throughout the night. This is called a “favorable microclimate”.

# Range Map: Rough-legged Hawk



Rough-legged Hawk, Copyright © Kate Davis



Raptors of the Rockies

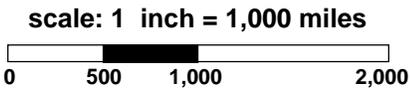


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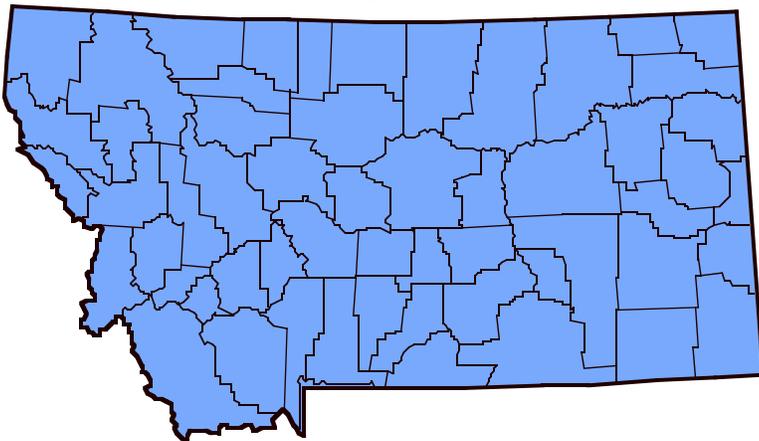
These maps are designed to show the general limits of occurrence. Within those limits, each species will likely be found only in appropriate habitat.

**Range Map Key**

- Summer
- Year-round
- Winter



## Raptor Range in Montana



Montana range maps are based on the Montana Bird Distribution data.