

What Are Raptors?

Raptors are birds of prey. The word *raptor* has a Latin origin meaning “to grasp or seize”. This is attributed to the claws on their feet also known as talons. Their sharp talons and strong feet capture and secure their prey.

The hooked upper beak allows them to break into their prey and tear off small, bite-sized pieces.

The large eyes of raptors take up 25 to 67 percent of their skulls depending on the species. Their well-developed eyes give them the ability to see great distances, eight to ten times better than humans.

These three tools are what define a bird as a bird of prey.

WHAT DO THEY EAT?

North American raptor species range in size from the delicate but speedy kestrel weighing one-third of a pound to the majestic Bald Eagle reaching 15 pounds. With such a difference in size and shape, different species of raptors have to hunt and eat different types of food. Small sized raptors often hunt insects, small reptiles and mammals. Medium sized raptors often hunt birds, mammals and larger reptiles. Large sized raptors often hunt larger birds, mammals and fish.

WHAT GOOD ARE RAPTORS?

Raptors play a unique role in the ecosystem because they are predators. Being at the top of the food chain, they help keep their biological community in balance by keeping their prey species' populations within the limits their habitats can sustain. For example, in a good year, plants flourish providing food for animals such as mice. The mice consume the food and produce more mice until all the food is gone. This would result in the devastation of the biological community unless the mouse population is kept stable by the hawks and owls. Raptors also help us track the health of the ecosystem. In some cases, they collect contaminants such as pesticides passed on to them from their prey. By observing raptors we can see how much pollution is in the environment and how it affects other wildlife and humans.

DIURNAL RAPTORS OF NORTH AMERICA

Hawks: These birds have broad wings and a broad tail. Generally they will hunt from a perch and chase down their prey in a short burst of speed.

Vultures: These birds have broad wings and a broad tail which they use to soar on air thermals to search for food on the ground. This is the only species of raptor that has a sense of smell and they are one of two exceptions of raptors without strong feet.

Condors: These birds are the second exception to birds of prey that lack long talons and the ability to grip prey with their feet. Instead of live animals, vultures and condors eat carrion.

Eagles: These birds have large wings, a massive beak and a heavy body. They are generally found soaring in search of food.

Falcons: These birds have long, pointed wings and tail. They are fast and agile and can dive upon food from great heights reaching incredible speeds. The Peregrine falcon, for example, can dive at speeds up to 200mph.

Kites: These birds are generally slim and light bodied. They feed mostly on insects, reptiles, amphibians and small mammals and are highly migratory.

Osprey: These birds have long, angled wings and large bodies. Only one bird belongs to this genus and it has white chest feathers and light patterns underneath the wings. They are mainly fish eaters who plunge feet first into the water to grab prey and then use their wings to push off the surface of the water.

NOCTURNAL RAPTORS OF NORTH AMERICA

Owls: These birds have broad wings and tail and a large head and eyes. They have excellent sight in low light conditions, great hearing and soft feathers for silent flight.