

SWAINSON'S HAWK

STATUS

Common name: Swainson's Hawk
Scientific name: *Buteo swainsoni*
State status: Threatened
Federal status: Protected under the
Migratory Bird Treaty Act



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NATURAL HISTORY

Swainson's hawks breed in North America and winter in the open grassland areas of southern South America (pampas) as well as parts of Mexico. In California, they breed in desert, shrub steppe, agricultural, and grassland habitats. Most of the state's breeding sites are located in the northeastern and Central Valley regions.

In the Central Valley, Swainson's hawks arrive at nesting areas in late February and early March, 4-6 weeks earlier than they arrive at nesting sites in NE California. They begin to depart for wintering areas in early September. Nests are built with an open platform construction composed of sticks and plant parts. Swainson's hawks prefer to nest along the periphery of riparian systems, but will also use lone trees or groves of trees in agricultural fields. They construct their nests in a variety of tree species in existing riparian forests, remnant riparian trees, shade trees at residences, and alongside roads, planted windbreaks, and solitary upland oaks. They typically do not nest in large continuous patches of woodland other than along edges next to open habitats.

Swainson's hawks prefer to forage aerially by soaring and coursing over open habitats. They depend largely on small mammals (voles and pocket gophers) during the breeding season and shift to feeding on insects during the non-breeding season, particularly crickets and grasshoppers. During the breeding season, they will travel long distances (up to 18 miles) in search of suitable foraging habitat that provides abundant prey. Under natural conditions, Swainson's hawks likely foraged in upland and seasonally flooded perennial grasslands. Today, row crops, fallow fields, dry land pasture, and irrigated pasture have become important foraging habitats. Home range size is highly variable and is dependent on the distance to, distribution of, and quality of foraging sites, as well as crop mowing or harvesting schedules.

THREATS TO THE SPECIES

1. Loss of preferred nesting habitat in mature riparian forest
2. Loss or adverse modification of high-quality foraging habitat to development or conversion to incompatible crop types
3. High mortality due to pesticide use on migration route and wintering areas



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