

FEBRUARY 15 – 28, 2021 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES

By Dick Harlow

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK



(1) **Rough-legged Hawk**, *Buteo lagopus*.
© Dick Harlow

A visitor from the Arctic during our winter is the Rough-legged Hawk, *Buteo lagopus*. This species nests in the high Arctic and winters in the northern part of the United States.

We rarely see them here at EastView; but they do visit us on occasion, but only briefly when they are confronted by either a local Red-tail or a dominant Northern Harrier.

This is a small-billed hawk. Notice the light-colored head against a rather mottled back and dark unbanded tail in picture #1. The lack of a band on the tail suggest this is a juvenile. Notice the almost square black carpal patches at the wrists on the underside of the wing in picture #2 and picture #3. This is characteristic of a Rough-legged Hawk. The demeanor of a Rough-legged Hawk is more delicate than the appearance found in most other hawks.

This hawk breeds in the Arctic on outcroppings along cliffs or low-lying tundra areas, always near open terrain looking for their food source. Rough-legs' primary food sources

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are small mammals such as voles and lemmings in the Arctic; but they will also prey on squirrels, rabbits, hares, and grouse in the winter when they move to southern Canada and Northern United States.



(2) **Rough-legged Hawk**, *Buteo lagopus*.

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It is the male's job to determine where the nest will be made. They usually will nest either in the open with little protection other than the cliff height itself or sometimes high in trees.

When they nest on cliffs they will also nest in the vicinity of other birds of prey, such as Peregrine Falcons, Gyrfalcons or Ravens. This was very interesting to me suggesting that this species is not intimidated by falcons or ravens; they are all trying to survive on food sources rather than on each other.

The Rough-legs' nests are simply a mass of sticks made from what they can find in the vicinity. They will line the nest with grasses or other soft material they can find in the vicinity.

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(3) **Rough-legged Hawk**, *Buteo lagopus*.

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When hawks in general are incubating eggs, it is usually up to the other individual in the pair to hunt and bring food to the nest. That is the job of the male.

In a lot of respects Rough-legged Hawks are very similar to Northern Harriers in their hunting techniques. They are active early morning or late afternoon hunters. They hunt alone whether perched on a fence post or flying over a field or meadow. They will hover and then dive onto their prospected prey.

Their hunting technique seems to be common with many grassland birds of prey that feed primarily, but not exclusively, on mammals.

OBSERVATIONS

MAMMALS

- Meadow Voles
- Red Fox tracks
- Gray Squirrel

Month of FEBRUARY 1-28, 2021 [*All Measurements taken at solar noon \(1230 EST\).*](#)

Average February Precipitation for Vermont = 1.8 inches.

Total precipitation for February 2021 was 22.4 mm or 0.9 inches. This is a 0.9 inch deficit for the month.

Overcast Days: We had 22 days, three weeks and one day of overcast skies. Of those overcast skies only five days produced precipitation. This month has added to our draught.