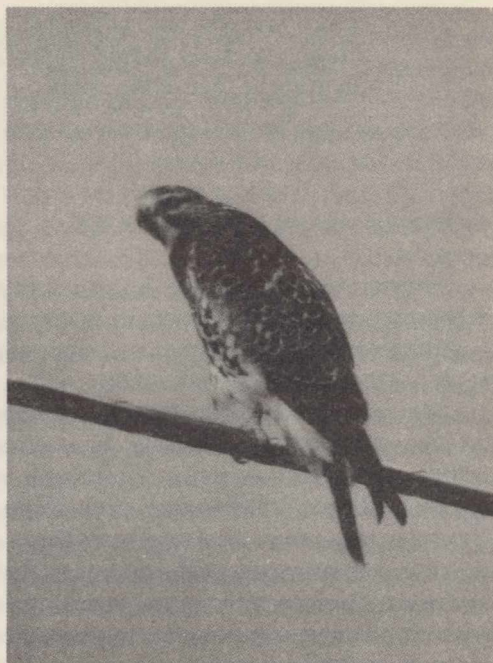


## Answer to Snap Judgment 3

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This photograph of a bird of prey (on typical modern-American perch) was published on the rear cover of the June *C.B.* with no clues, other than that it was taken somewhere north of Mexico. Can you identify the bird?



Many of us learn to separate the raptors first by their appearance in the air. When seen overhead, most in North America can be quickly assigned to one of the major groupings (accipiters, buteos, falcons — or to one of the minor groupssuch as harriers or ospreys) on the basis of shape, and then run down to species by reference to plumage characters and minor details of silhouette. When perched, however, some quite unrelated raptors can look surprisingly similar: most of the useful flight characters disappear, and even a familiar species can momentarily pose an unfamiliar challenge. It can cause us to focus on characters we normally do not notice on flying hawks.

On first glance at this photo, no doubt, some readers will have wavered on the choice between large falcon or slim buteo. The elongated look (with long pointed wings) and some aspects of the face pattern do indeed appear falconine. However, a longer study should indicate that the body of this bird is too bulky, not streamlined enough for a falcon. For a more concrete distinguishing character, we may look to the *scapular feathers*: they are broad, oval-ended and quite large, unlike those of any North American falcon.

Our mystery bird, then, is of the buteo group. The area we can see of the flanks is marked with arrowhead-shaped or spade-shaped spots, suggesting that the bird may be an immature but providing little help in determining the species. We know that some buteos are quite variable in plumage; what particular characters will lead us to a specific identification?

The *face pattern* on the pictured bird is likely to draw attention. Our bird has a whitish forehead set off from a dark crown, a narrow but sharply defined light

superciliary line separated from the palish cheeks by a dark postocular line, and a very dark malar area just above the clear whitish throat. Although some of these features appear in the face patterns of other *Buteo* species, the clear-cut pattern shown here points to an immature of one of three North American possibilities: Swainson's Hawk *B. swainsoni*, Broad-winged Hawk *B. platypterus*, or Gray Hawk *B. nitidus*.

A second plumage character worth noting on the pictured hawk is the appearance of the *wing coverts*: they are very dark, appearing almost blackish in this shot, with sharply demarcated pale tips creating a scaled or scalloped effect on the folded wing (a pattern repeated, to an extent, on the scapulars). While this might seem a simple pattern, it is displayed by the immatures of only two North American *Buteo* species: Broad-winged and Swainson's hawks.

Although rarely emphasized (or even illustrated correctly) in field guides, the pattern of the individual coverts and scapulars is a worthwhile point to check in identifying perched hawks. For example, the mottled whitish back patches that seem so characteristic of Red-tailed Hawks *B. jamaicensis* perched at a distance are formed by the individual feather patterns on the scapulars and inner coverts: these have large white or pale buffy spots or scallopings along the edges, as shown in Figure 1. As the feathers become worn, of course, the light areas near the tips may wear away, but this process exposes the pale spots on the underlapping feathers so that the mottled white look is never lost. By contrast, on juvenile Swainson's Hawks these feathers have pale areas only at the tips (and narrowly on the edges on some scapulars); once these have worn away, the wings and back appear a rather uniform chocolate-black.

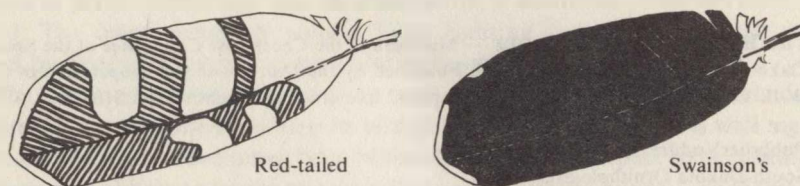


FIGURE 1. Samples of median upper wing coverts on juvenile Swainson's and Red-tailed hawks.

This digression has nothing to do with the identity of the bird in the photograph. But by now — armed with the information that it must be either Broad-winged or Swainson's — most readers will have arrived at the correct answer. The stretched-out look, the long pointed wings and longish tail, all rule against the compact little Broadwing.

This juvenile **Swainson's Hawk** was photographed in Sublette County, Wyoming, in August 1979 by Kenneth V. Rosenberg.