

THE RED-SHOULDERED HAWK IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES

Sanford R. Wilbur

The Pacific Coast race of the Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus elegans*) has been the object of ornithological concern for many years. Shortly after the turn of the century, Willett (1912) noted its apparent increasing scarcity in portions of coastal Southern California, and Dawson (1924) thought the species was "sharply on the wane". More recently, the U.S. Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife (1968) included it on a list of "status undetermined" wildlife – possibly rare or endangered but sufficient information not available. After a partial examination of distribution records, Cohen (1970) concluded that western Red-shouldered Hawk numbers were reduced and would continue to decline due to habitat loss. However, Brown (1971) analyzed Christmas Bird Count data and could see no significant change in California populations from 1950 through 1969. Therefore, current status has remained unclear.

From January 1970 through July 1972, I continued to add to the Red-shouldered Hawk record by personal observation, continuing review of the literature, and through inspection of the field notes of cooperators. Results of this review are discussed below.

CURRENT DISTRIBUTION AND NUMBERS

Northwestern California. Cohen (1970) located a few scattered records of Red-shouldered Hawks in Del Norte and Humboldt counties, and concluded that a small (possibly recently established) population is found there. I compiled several other records for various parts of these two counties, and also for central Mendocino County. Red-shouldered Hawks apparently occur throughout the western portion of these three Counties. No major population centers are evident, but the birds are widespread.

San Francisco Bay Area. B. D. Parmeter (pers. comm.) considers the Red-shouldered Hawk a common year-long resident in Sonoma County, particularly at Santa Rosa. It is also found along the coast of Sonoma County, and in adjacent Marin County. While the Sonoma-Marin area is the main population center, the Red-shouldered Hawk occurs sparsely in most other Bay Area counties.

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK

Central Coastal California. Cohen (1970) presents information that suggests Red-shouldered Hawks may be increasing in the area from Santa Cruz south through Santa Barbara County. That sizeable populations occur in the Monterey, Morro Bay and Santa Barbara areas is borne out by recent Christmas Bird Counts. The biggest concentrations appear to be near the coast, but birds also are seen in canyon areas inland.

Southern California. Although human population expansion in Southern California has reduced wildlife habitat, the Red-shouldered Hawk is still widespread. Large numbers are found in Orange and San

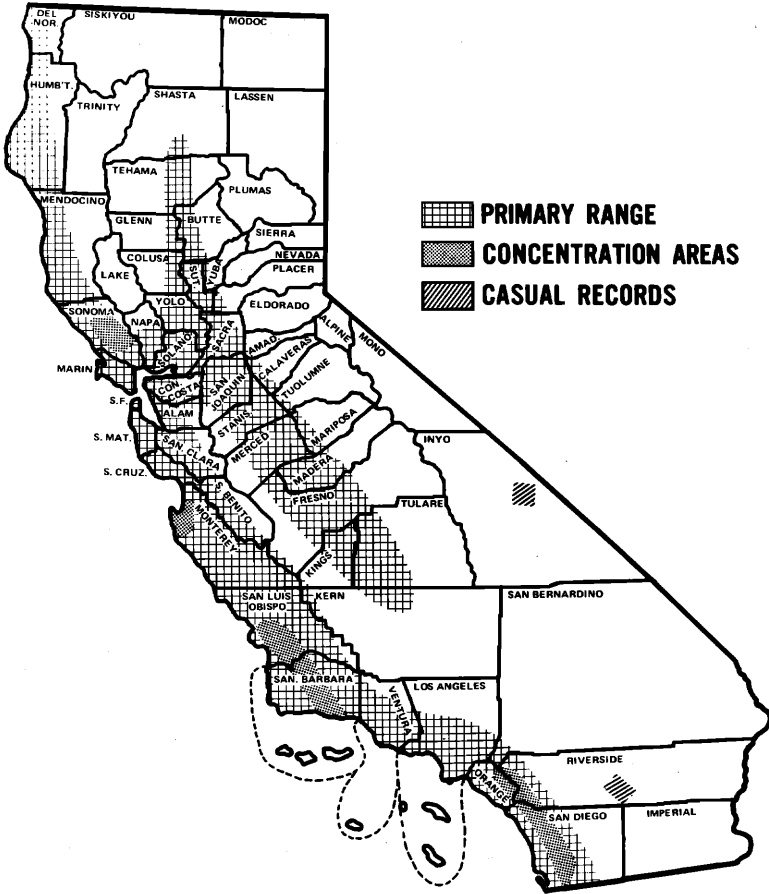


Figure 1. Distribution of the Red-shouldered Hawk in California.

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK

Diego counties, and smaller populations in adjacent areas. Cohen (1970) found an apparently resident population near Victorville, and the species has been reported nesting in Morongo Valley (G. McCaskie, pers. comm.), both in San Bernardino County.

Sacramento-San Joaquin Valleys. There seem to be no major congregation areas in the Central Valley, but there are records from scattered localities throughout the Valley and adjacent foothill areas.

Outside California. Recently, Red-shouldered Hawks have been recorded once in extreme southwestern Oregon, and several times near Las Vegas, Nevada. I found only one recent record for northwestern Baja California, but the species has been considered resident there (Grinnell 1928). The observations in Nevada are interesting because they are for all seasons and have included up to four individuals, suggesting more than occasional wandering.

DISCUSSION

Because Red-shouldered Hawks inhabit wooded country and are quiet and retiring except during courtship (Bent 1937), they probably go unnoticed and unreported by many observers. Therefore, lack of records in a particular area does not necessarily mean the species is not found there. Their semi-solitary habits and usual preference for scattered tracts of streamside woodland also makes population estimates difficult, and few researchers have attempted them. Also, because numbers have usually been recorded in such terms as "common", "conspicuous" or "uncommon", it is difficult to judge population changes by comparing reports made during different time periods and by different people.

Probably the best indications of change are: 1) whether Red-shouldered Hawks are now absent in areas where they once were present, 2) whether they now occur in areas formerly unoccupied, and 3) whether there have been obvious increases or decreases in the size of local populations.

The general range of the western Red-shouldered Hawk is given by Grinnell and Miller (1944) as the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys and the southern coastal area of California. They listed few records north of San Francisco Bay, and none for the southeastern desert portions of the State. Numbers apparently had been reduced in some areas by this time due to progressive human occupancy of the land, but Grinnell and Miller gave no indication of major changes in the range of the species.

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK

Cohen (1970) lists a number of localities for which he could find no Red-shouldered Hawk records after 1939. However, I have subsequently found recent records for most of these areas, or for nearby locations. Therefore, although this species may have been displaced from certain limited areas of its former range, Red-shouldered Hawks apparently have not been lost from any major segment of their original range within California.

In contrast, this species is now found regularly in some areas for which few historical records exist. Part of this increase and apparent range expansion is perhaps the result of more observers in the field and more regularity in reporting or, as suggested by Cohen (1970) for birds found near Victorville, San Bernardino County, the result of birds being displaced in certain areas and moving to others. However, early observers would probably not have missed the current large population in the Santa Rosa (Sonoma County) area or the scattered, but apparently rather large total population of Humboldt and Del Norte counties. Sightings near Las Vegas, Nevada, at various times of the year hint of a population establishing itself in an area for which there seem to be no records prior to 1969. It appears that the Red-shouldered Hawk not only occurs throughout its former range generally, but may also be occupying areas not inhabited historically.

This review suggests that the following changes in numbers and distribution have occurred: *Northwestern California*. Since this area is seldom mentioned in early literature, the regularity with which Red-shouldered Hawks are now seen may indicate some increase. *San Francisco Bay Area*. Current commonness around Santa Rosa seems to indicate an increase there. In other parts of the Bay Area, the species is rare to uncommon, indicating little change since the 1920's (Grinnell and Wythe 1927). *Central Coast*. Only one of six early (1884-1908) bird lists for the northern half of this region mentions the Red-shouldered Hawk. This would indicate it has always been rare. Currently it is widespread, but generally the population is of low density. Probably no major change in status has occurred. In the southern portion of this region, Cohen (1970) feels some local populations have decreased in size, but others have increased. No overall comparisons with past populations seem possible. The Red-shouldered Hawk is now quite common in this region, particularly around Morro Bay and Santa Barbara. *Southern California*. Although there presumably was a decrease in Red-shouldered Hawks in this region prior to 1920 (Willett 1912), there is little evidence of decrease

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK

since then. Evermann (1886) considered the species common in Ventura County; it still is, particularly in the Ojai-Santa Paula area. Willett (1912) stated there were a "few pairs" left in Los Angeles County; today, there are obviously more than that. Willett (1933) recorded it as scarce or extinct in the San Bernardino area; today it is uncommon there but apparently still widely distributed. Dixon's (1928) San Diego County record of 23 nesting locations within 30 miles of Escondido appears comparable to Mrs. Alice Fries' 1972 record (pers. comm.) of 13 active nests within 20 miles of Escondido. All things considered, the Red-shouldered Hawk may be as abundant in this region now as it was 50 years ago. *Sacramento-San Joaquin Valleys*. There are no records available for Sacramento Valley that give an indication of past population sizes. Today in that area, the Red-shouldered Hawk is widespread but relatively uncommon. It must have been fairly common in the San Joaquin Valley: Belding (1879) lists it as "very common" at Stockton; Fisher (1893) notes it as "abundant" on the Kings River, and "not uncommon" at Visalia; Linton (1908) lists it as "fairly common" at Buena Vista Lake; and Grinnell and Storer (1929) found it in "moderate numbers" along the Merced River. Today it is widespread in the San Joaquin Valley and adjacent foothills, but in few places could it be considered very common. Therefore, the Red-shouldered Hawk likely is less common than it was prior to 1920, but when the population decline occurred is not clear.

Overall, it appears there may have been some range expansion since the 1920's, and no major declines except perhaps in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Valleys. Red-shouldered Hawks are currently widespread in a variety of habitats and, from general observation, appear to be reproducing successfully. Although continuing loss of habitat may be expected in certain parts of the range, the species appears adaptable to a greater variety of living situations than was previously thought. Red-shouldered Hawks now nest in residential areas (e.g., Ojai, Ventura County) some distance from water, and are suspected of nesting at previously unoccupied inland areas in southern California and Nevada. Evidently some water development projects have actually increased the attractiveness of certain areas (Dixon 1928, Cohen 1970). With increasing concern over wanton shooting of raptors and with better law enforcement, there is good reason to be satisfied with the current status of this species in the Western States, and to be optimistic about its future.

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks go to Mrs. Alice Fries, Dr. B. D. Parmeter and Dr. C. F. Yocom for allowing me use of their field notes.

APPENDIX

Records included below were picked as representative of recent distribution and numbers of the Red-shouldered Hawk in western North America. Abbreviations used are: fn, field notes; AFN, *Audubon Field Notes*; AB, *American Birds*; CBC, Christmas Bird Counts.

Northwestern California

Del Norte County - 1, Klamath, 11 Feb. 1967 (Yocom fn); 1, Crescent City, 15 Aug. 1969 (AFN 24:90, 1970); 2, Smith River Valley, April-May 1970 (AFN 24:639, 1970); 2, Fort Dick, early April 1971 (AB 25:794, 1971). *Humboldt County* - 1, Korbek, 10 April 1943; 1, Humboldt Bay, 18 Sept. 1943; 1, Eureka, 7 Oct. 1943; 1, Freshwater Lagoon, 6 Jan. 1944; 1, Samoa, 29 Sept. 1946 (all above from W. Anderson, Yocom fn); 2, Arcata, 25 May 1954 (Stampf, Yocom fn); 1 (collected), Willow Creek, 10 May 1953; 1, Willow Creek, 30 May 1953 (Talmadge, Condor 55:315, 1953); 1, Orick, April-May 1957 (AFN 11:374, 1957); 2, Prairie Creek State Park, 5 Oct. 1958 (Yocom fn); 2 (courting), Arcata, 9 April 1960 (Yocom fn); 1, Orick, 16 Jan.-21 Fe. 1970 (AFN 24:535, 1970); 3, Humboldt Bay area, 27-29 Nov. 1970 (AB 25:101, 1971); 5, Humboldt Bay Area CBC, 2 Jan. 1972 (AB 26:502, 1972). *Mendocino County* - 1, Willits, 4 May 1957 (Legg, Yocom fn); 1, Willits, 13 May 1967 (Yocom fn); 3, Ukiah, 10 April 1971 (Wilbur fn).

San Francisco Bay Area

Sonoma County - Numerous records, 1-2 birds each, Santa Rosa area, 1956-1970, all months (Parmeter fn); 1, Duncan's Mills, 8 Dec. 1963 (Parmeter fn); 1, Petaluma, April 1964 (Parmeter fn); 1, Coleman Valley, 21 Dec. 1965 (Parmeter fn); 1, Duncan's Mills, 10 June 1967 (Parmeter fn); 1, Bodega Lagoon, 18 Oct. 1968 (Parmeter fn); 1, Guerneville, 31 May 1971 (Parmeter fn). 1969-1970 Christmas Bird Counts: coastal Sonoma County 3, 4, 18; Santa Rosa area 37, 39, 21. *Napa County* - 1969-1971 Angwin area CBC 3, 4, 8. *Solano County* - 1, Benicia, 31 Dec. 1969 (AFN 24:436, 1970). *Marin County* - 1969-1971 Point Reyes Peninsula CBC 6, 14, 12. *Alameda County* - 2, Fremont area CBC, 27 Dec. 1970 (AB 25:487, 1971). *San Mateo County* - 1, Crystal Springs Reservoir, 27 Dec. 1969 (AFN 24:439, 1970); 1, Crystal Springs Res., 2 Jan. 1971 (AB 25:486, 1971). *Santa Clara County* - 4 nesting pairs, Santa Clara Valley, summer 1969 (AFN 23:690, 1969); 1 each, 1969-1970 San Jose CBC.

Central Coastal California

Santa Cruz County - 1969-1971 Santa Cruz CBC 1, 2, 1. *Monterey County* - 1, Hastings Reserve, 23 May 1970 (Anon., Sanderling 27:2, 1970). 1969-1971 Monterey Peninsula CBC 6, 7, 9. *San Luis Obispo County* - 1, Avenales Station,

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK

5 May 1970 (Wilbur fn); 1, Pozo Station, 9 June 1970 (Wilbur fn); "more than two dozen", Santa Barbara to Morro Bay, 21 Nov. 1970 (Cook, El Tecolote 9:3, 1971); 1, San Luis Obispo, 8 Jan. 1971 (Wilbur fn). 1969-1971 Morro Bay area CBC 13, 9, 32. *Santa Barbara County* - 1969-1971 Santa Barbara CBC 14, 14, 8.

Southern California

Ventura County - 1, Upper Ojai Valley, 19 Dec. 1969; 1, Ojai, 23 April 1970; 1, Santa Paula Creek, 21 May 1970; 1, Ojai, 8 June 1970; 1, Upper Ojai, 14 Oct. 1970; 2, Lake Casitas, 8 Jan. 1971; 2, Ojai, 19 Feb. 1971; 1, Ferndale Ranch, 4 Jan. 1972; 1, Santa Paula, 10 March 1972; 1, Upper Ojai, 17 March 1972; 2 (nesting), Oak View, summer 1972 (Wilbur fn). 1969-1970 Fillmore CBC 2, 3. *Los Angeles County* - 1969-1971 Christmas Bird Counts: Malibu 3, 3, 14; Palos Verdes Peninsula 2, 4, 0; San Fernando Valley 1, 5, 0; Pasadena 1, 5, 3; Los Angeles 0, 1, 1. *Riverside County* - 1, Idyllwild CBC, 20 Dec. 1969 (AFN 24:441, 1970); 1, Coachella Valley, 29 Dec. 1970 (AB 25:503, 1971); 1, Palm Springs, 25 Jan. 1971 (AB 25:627, 1971). *San Bernardino County* - 1969-1971 San Bernardino area CBC 2, 1, 4. 1970-1971 Yucaipa area CBC 1, 2. *Orange County* - nest, San Juan Station, 16 Feb. 1972 (Fries fn); nest, San Juan Capistrano, 16 Feb. 1972 (Fries fn). 1969-1971 Christmas Bird Counts: Huntington Harbor area 1, 2, 3; Cleveland National Forest 21, 28, 23. *San Diego County* - 5 nests, Valley Center-Escondido area, summer 1971 (Fries fn); 13 nests, Escondido-Fallbrook-Valley Center area, summer 1972 (Fries fn). 1969-1971 Christmas Bird Counts: San Diego 10, 4, 4; Oceanside-Carlsbad 14, 10, 9.

Sacramento-San Joaquin Valleys

Butte County - 1969-1971 Christmas Bird Counts: Chico 2, 7, 6; Oroville 1, 1. *Glenn County* - uncommon resident, Willows area (Sacramento Nat. Wildl. Refuge bird list; Wilbur fn). *Yuba County* - 1, Marysville CBC, 30 Dec. 1969. *Yolo County* - 2, Putah Creek CBC, 27 Dec. 1971. *Sacramento County* - 2 pairs, Sacramento, summer 1969 (AFN 23:690, 1969); 2, Carmichael, spring 1971 (AB 25:968, 1971); 1969-1971 Sacramento CBC 5, 2, 3. *San Joaquin County* - 1969-1971 CBC: Stockton 2, 3, 2; Wallace-Bellota area 1, 3, 0. *Merced County* - Occasionally seen, Los Banos Wildlife Area (R. Wilbur, pers. comm.). *Fresno County* - 1970-1971 Fresno CBC 1, 12. *Tulare County* - 1, Springville, 28 April 1970 (Wilbur fn); 1, Springville, 30 Aug. 1970 (Wilbur fn); nest, Porterville, spring 1972 (T. Reed, pers. comm.). *Kern County* - 1, Granite Station CBC, 30 Dec. 1971.

Miscellaneous

Inyo County, California - 1, Furnace Creek, Death Valley, 30 Aug. and 30 Nov. 1969 (AFN 23:520, 1969; AFN 24:100, 1970). *Mono County, California* - 2, Mono Lake, 13 Dec. 1971 and 1, Mono Lake, 24 May 1972 (G. McCaskie, pers. comm.). *Nevada* - 1-4, Las Vegas, Sept.-Dec. 1969 (AFN 24:76, 1970); 1, Desert Game Range, Dec. 1969 (AFN 24:423, 1970); 1, Desert Nat. Wildl. Range, 12 July 1970 (AFN 24:704, 1970). *Oregon* - 1, California-Oregon border, Curry County, 19 Sept. 1971 (AB 26:108, 1972); 1, Winchuck River, Curry County, 3 Oct. 1971 (AB 26:108, 1972). *Baja California, Mexico* - 1, 6 miles north Ensenada, 25 and 26 Dec. 1969 (A. Craig, pers. comm.).

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK

LITERATURE CITED

- Belding, L. 1879. A partial list of the birds of central California. Proc. U.S. Nat. Museum 1:388-449.
- Bent, A. C. 1937. Life histories of North American birds of prey. U.S. Nat. Museum Bull. 167.
- Brown, W. H. 1971. Winter population trends in the Red-shouldered Hawk. Am. Birds 25:813-817.
- Cohen, S. F. 1970. The distribution of the western Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus elegans* Cassin). M.S. Thesis, California State College at Long Beach.
- Dawson, W. L. 1924. The birds of California. Vol. 3. South Moulton Co., San Diego.
- Dixon, J. B. 1928. Life history of the Red-bellied Hawk. Condor 30:228-236.
- Evermann, B. W. 1886. A list of the birds observed in Ventura County, California. Auk 3:86-94; 179-186.
- Fisher, A. K. 1893. Report on the ornithology of the Death Valley expedition of 1891. North Amer. Fauna 7:7-158.
- Grinnell, J. 1928. A distributional summation of the ornithology of Lower California. U. C. Publ. Zool. 32:1-300.
- Grinnell, J. and A. H. Miller. 1944. The distribution of the birds of California. Pac. Coast Avif. no. 27.
- Grinnell, J. and T. I. Storer. 1924. Animal life in the Yosemite. Univ. of California Press, Berkeley.
- Grinnell, J. and M. W. Wythe. 1927. Directory of the bird-life of the San Francisco Bay region. Pac. Coast Avif. no. 18.
- Linton, C. B. 1908. Notes from Buena Vista Lake, May 20 to June 16, 1907. Condor 10:196-198.
- U.S. Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife. 1968. Rare and endangered fish and wildlife of the United States. Resource Publ. 34.
- Willett, G. 1912. Birds of the Pacific slope of Southern California. Pac. Coast Avif. no. 7.
- Willett, G. 1933. A revised list of the birds of southwestern California. Pac. Coast Avif. no. 21.

Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, U.S. Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Ojai, California 93023.

