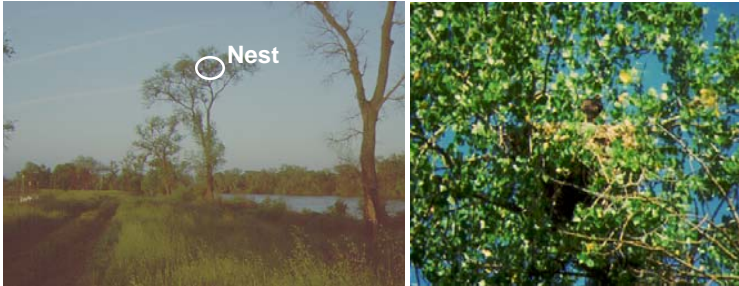


Swainson's Hawk : Nest and hawk identification



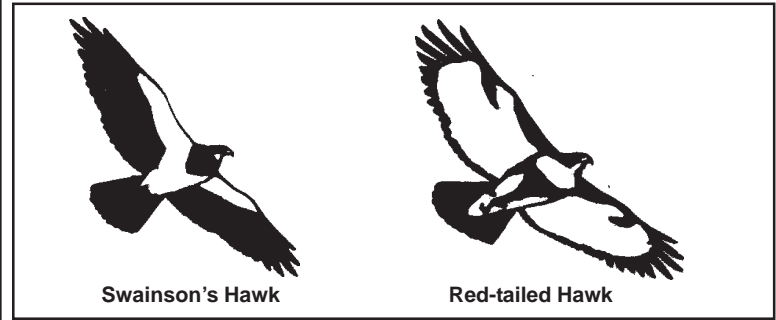
Photos: Leopoldo A. Moreno

In the Central Valley, Swainson's hawks build large stick nests near the top of tall trees, primarily Cottonwoods, Oaks or Willows. They can be found nesting in dense stands of riparian vegetation or single trees along rivers, creeks and sloughs. They also nest in trees which are adjacent to agricultural crops such as Alfalfa, Pastures, Sugar Beets, Tomatoes, or any open field crops, as well as fallow fields.

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Swainson's Hawk



Swainson's hawk nests are large and platform-like, built mostly with sticks. Some nests are built right on top of mistletoe clumps. The nests last several years, and might be used not only by several Swainson's hawks, but also by other raptor species such as red-tailed hawks and great-horned owls. When Swainson's hawks arrive from their winter migration, they might find their nest already occupied by other raptors. Such competition for nest sites is another indicator of the limited amount of suitable nesting habitat currently available.

Identification of Hawks in flight

To the novice, it might be difficult to tell Swainson's hawks from other similar species such as the red-tailed hawk. However, some distinctive patterns can be found, particularly when the birds are in flight (see drawing). Swainson's hawks have more slender and pointed wings than red-tailed hawks, which have broad, round wings. Adult red-tailed hawks have a distinctively reddish-brown tail. Although both species have light and dark plumages, the patterns observed in their undersides are almost negatives of each other. Swainson's hawks tend to have a dark "bib" on their chest, while red-tailed hawks have a light chest surrounded by a darker feathers. The leading edge of the red-tailed hawk's wings is black while in the Swainson's hawk it is light. The flight feathers of the Swainson's hawk tend to be darker than those of the red-tailed hawk; conversely, the wing linings are lighter in the Swainson's hawk. Dark individuals of both species can sometimes be difficult to tell apart at a glance.