

Text and Photo by © Brian Wheeler

With their multiple color morphs, the western buteos—especially the “Harlan’s” subspecies (*harlani*) of Red-tailed Hawk—have intrigued me ever since I began work on my *Field Guide to Hawks of North America* for Houghton Mifflin in the early 1980s. At the time, I was living in Connecticut, but I frequently traveled to the West to study these birds. Since moving to Colorado in 1986 I have spent thousands of hours in the field photographing these poorly understood western buteos. In 1996 I obtained a contract with Princeton University Press to write and illustrate with hundreds of photographs a set of East/West books on North American raptors. With a contract nailed down, I spent even more concentrated time afield in order to get images of as much variation in raptors as I could. Work on these two books took six years to complete. They were published in the fall of 2003 as a two volume set: *Raptors of Eastern North America* and *Raptors of Western North America*.

“Harlan’s” Hawks are relatively common in much of their core winter range, which includes northeastern Colorado along the South Platte River, the Front Range region, and the southeastern portion of the state. Living just north of Denver, I have ready access to these magnificent birds. At the time I took this particular image, most of my field study was near home and along the South Platte River. (A few years later, I found even more impressive migratory and wintering areas in Prowers County in southeastern Colorado.)

As noted above, “Harlan’s” Hawks exhibit impressive plumage variation due to multiple color morphs in the subspecies. There is a continual plumage gradient from the palest light-morph individual to the darkest dark-morph individual. What was previously described as the typical “Harlan’s” in all

previously published bird books is actually an intermediate morphology in their vast spectrum of plumages; I refer to such birds as intermediate-morph, and I note that it is the most common morph in this subspecies. In my recently published books (Princeton University Press), I recognized five color morphs of “Harlan’s” Hawk. There was not room, even in a set of books with coverage as extensive as in my Princeton guides, to show the nearly infinite span of color morphs for this subspecies. These color morph categories are: light, light intermediate, intermediate, dark intermediate, and dark.

The image of the adult “Harlan’s” Red-tailed Hawk on the cover is what I call the dark intermediate morph. This very cooperative bird is also shown on two plates in my Princeton guides (perched, *Pl.* 315–East, *Pl.* 356–West; in



flight, Pl. 337–East, Pl. 388–West). It is less common than the more lightly marked intermediate morph. This dark intermediate morph is basically all blackish brown with a small amount of white speckling on the breast. As on the bird depicted on the cover, there may be some irregular white flecking on the head and throat.

There are many misconceptions about the plumages of “Harlan’s” Hawks. It was long thought that they have black-and-white bars on the tips of the outer primaries. All juveniles seem to, but many adults have solid black outer primaries, as shown by the cover photo. As far as the rest of the primaries, it was once thought that these, too, are always barred. Not so. Some adults have totally barred remiges, others are unmarked, some are mottled, and some are a mix of characters. The bird in the cover photo exhibits a primarily barred pattern, but there is at least one inner primary that is mainly solid gray. Tail patterns of adult “Harlan’s” Hawks, too, are rather infinite in design. The cover bird sports a dark gray upper surface of the tail with black speckling and a broad, irregular, black terminal band. The underside of most tails are whitish when seen in decent light.

As I mentioned above, I used to spend countless hours in the field photographing. During late October and into mid-November, I made regular trips to northeastern Colorado for migrant Red-tails with a concerted effort to find Harlan’s. However, other western raptors were also target species on my trips to this region, notably Ferruginous Hawks and Golden Eagles. At the time there were huge colonies of black-tailed prairie dogs, which in the 1990s were virtually obliterated by the plague. It was not uncommon to see seven Golden Eagles on the ground haggling over a dead prairie dog. My trips took me out along Colorado Highways 6 and 138 east of the town of Brush. Most of the photographic action took place east of the village of Crook on Highway 138. That is where I got photographs of this bird on a sunny day in early November.

Adult Harlan’s Hawks are notorious for being skittish. In 28 years of raptor photography, I can probably count on one hand how many adult Harlan’s Hawks have perched for me for their portraits! And of those, only one

actually perched at eye level: this one. Only the tamest of raptors north of the Mexican border, such as Harris’s, Swainson’s, and White-tailed Hawks, will regularly perch at eye level when approached by a vehicle. Raptors, like many other birds, are intimidated when faced at eye level by potential danger. They feel safer when they are above any perceived danger.

My method for photographing perched buteos has always been to use my vehicle as a mobile blind, which is what I did in this case. I shut the engine off and coasted up next to the bird, which was initially on a rather broad-topped fence post about 80 feet away. Using my Canon EOS 3 with a f/2.8 300mm Canon lens with the Canon 1.4× extender for total of 420 mm, I held the rig out of the window and snapped off a couple of shots of the perched bird. Normally I use my 300mm with the Canon 2× extender for 600 mm on a bean bag on the window for perched birds. However, I knew that, since the hawk was a Harlan’s, it was rather unlikely to stay perched for long; with the 420mm setup, though, I could get okay perched shots and rather nice flight shots. Once the bird recognized I was a human behind the big lens and took to the air, I got a couple of neat flight images. Inside the camera was Provia F 100 ISO slide film, which I always push to 200 ISO.

I am not out in the field quite as much as when I was working on the *Raptors of North America* series. Rather, I have been in the studio painting book plates for a new set of East/West raptor field guides for Princeton University Press. These books will have a total of 92 color illustrated plates painted on colored tones of museum-grade rag mat boards. Of the 92 plates, 14 plates are devoted to Red-tails with four plates of “Harlan’s.” Princeton plans on publishing these innovative books in the fall of 2011.

About the Photographer

Brian K. Wheeler is illustrator and coauthor of *Hawks of North America* (Houghton Mifflin 1987, 2001), coauthor and co-photographer of *A Photographic Guide to North American Raptors* (Academic Press 1995, Princeton University Press 2003), and author and photographer of *Raptors of Eastern North America* and *Raptors of Western North America* (Princeton University Press 2003).