



RAPTOR DIVERSITY

Identifying Subgroups

The **Cornell** Lab of Ornithology
Bird Academy

To help you better identify raptors as they soar or fly overhead, this guide breaks down species into the subgroups of the U.S. and Canada.

A great way to begin your identification is to note the size and shape of the raptor with this 3-step method:

1. Narrow it down to one of the subgroups using shape and proportions.
2. Look for at least three clues such as color pattern, markings, behavior, or habitat.
3. Narrow it down to the most likely species.

Raptor Subgroups: United States & Canada



Vultures



Buteos



Kites



Eagles/Osprey



Accipiters



Falcons



Others

Learn more about our self-paced, online course:

<https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/product/be-a-better-birder-hawk-and-raptor-identification/>

Keys to ID: **Tail Shape**

Tails can be long or short. They can be notched, meaning they have a V shape with short central tail feathers, or they can be totally square. Tails can also be slightly rounded or have a pointed tip, so watch for these shapes.



Long



Short



Notched



Square



Rounded



Pointed

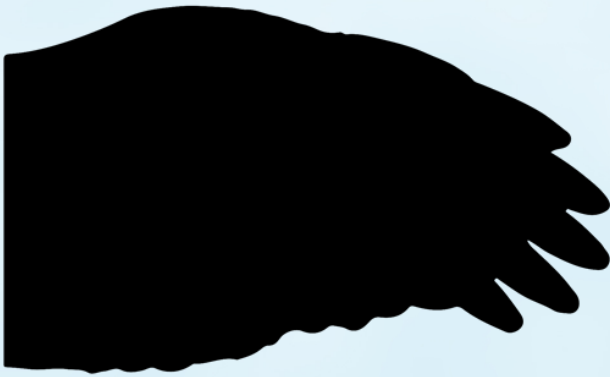
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Keys to ID: **Wing Shape**

Wings can be either rounded or pointed at the tip. Rounded wings look like a hand, with all the feathers about the same length. Very pointed wings have one longer feather. Emarginate or closed wings describe whether or not the wings have “fingers” at the ends. Wings can also be broad or narrow and short or long.

All of these characteristics are found in different combinations in different birds.



Rounded at tip	-or-	Pointed at tip
Emarginate	-or-	Closed
Broad	-or-	Narrow
Short	-or-	Long

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Accipiters

- Three species in this group
- Short broad wings are built for maneuverability
- Short fingers in the wings
- Long tails



Buteos

- Twelve species in this group
- Broad wings
- Moderate fingers in the wings
- Short, square tails
- Chunky, broad-bodied



Eagles and Osprey

- Three species in this group
- Very large birds
- Large wings built for soaring
- Long fingers in the wings
- Medium-long tails



Falcons

- Six species in this group
- Long, pointed wings are built for speed
- Narrow wingtips with no fingers
- Long tails



Kites

- Three species in this group
- Long, slender, pointed wings
- Wings often have a bend in the center
- Long tails
- Elongated, graceful build



Vultures

- Three species in this group
- Very broad, long wings
- Medium-short tails
- Long fingers in the wings



Others

- Grab bag of misfits unlike the raptors in the other groups
- Two broad-winged kites with extremely rounded wings
- Northern Harrier
- Crested Caracara



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New Online Course!

[Hawk & Raptor Identification](#)

is a new self-paced course full of video instruction, quizzes, and lessons on all raptors in the U.S. and Canada. Taught by Dr. Kevin J. McGowan, this course is THE definitive online resource for raptor enthusiasts of all levels.

Shape Characteristics of Raptor Subgroups (United States & Canada)

Category	Wing Length	Wing Width	Wing Shape	Tail Length
Accipiters	Short	Broad	Rounded	Long
Buteos	Moderately Long	Broad	Rounded	Short
Eagles	Long	Broad	Rounded	Short
Falcons	Long	Narrow	Pointed	Long
Kites	Long	Narrow	Pointed	Long
Vultures	Long	Broad	Rounded	Short

There's Much More to Learn!

Bird Academy's self-paced, online course *Be a Better Birder: Hawk & Raptor ID* covers all 34 raptor species in the U.S. and Canada. You'll get to know their markings and behaviors so that next time you see a hawk fly by, you'll be able to confidently add it to your list.

In this course, you will:

- Discover the diversity of raptors—from vultures and hawks to kites and kestrels
- Learn ID shortcuts with Kevin's Keys to ID videos and diagrams
- Build your skills with exclusive access to the powerful and fun SnapID practice tool

[Learn More](#)



“How many times have you seen a raptor on a fencepost or passing overhead and wondered what it was? Raptors are a great group of birds to learn because they're so visible on the landscape and so awe inspiring. I've packed all my identification tips and tricks into this course alongside a powerful new training tool called SnapID so that next time you see a hawk, vulture, or kite fly by, you will be able to confidently name it. Enjoy!”

—Dr. Kevin McGowan, Course Instructor