

# Flying Carnivores

## Raptors

**T**he term raptor refers to birds of prey. In ornithology, this includes birds that have keen eyesight for finding prey, strong feet for holding prey, and a strong curved beak for tearing flesh.

This includes hawks, falcons, and eagles, which hunt during daylight hours (diurnal) and owls, which hunt primarily at night (nocturnal). At least 27 species of raptors and owls have been observed at Cheyenne Bottoms. They range in size from the diminutive American kestrel and eastern screech owl to eagles and the snowy owl. Being at or near the top of the food chain, raptors are an important component of the marsh ecology.

Because of their predatory behavior, they face some distinct conservation concerns. Accumulation of toxins in prey items makes them more susceptible to poisoning. This process is called biological magnification. With each successive step up the food chain, some pesticides and heavy metals become more concentrated, greatly increasing the amount consumed by the top predator.



Great horned owl  
KDWPT Photo



Northern harrier, KDWPT

### Harriers

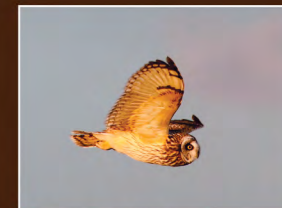
Throughout the year, but especially in winter, you can see hawks flying low over the marsh with a low, floppy flight. These are northern harriers, formerly called with the descriptive name of "marsh hawk." The males are silver and white with black wingtips. The young and females are brown. Both have white patches on their rumps. Their primary prey are rodents residing in the marsh vegetation.

### Red-tails and Owls

In the drier areas surrounding the wetlands, many other raptors and owls can be seen soaring or perching on poles or tree tops. Red-tailed hawks are the most common year-round resident raptors. Great-horned owls are the most common owl found in the basin, and like redtails, are year-round residents.



Red-tailed hawk, KDWPT



Short-eared owl, KDWPT

### Motion and Change

During winter, short-eared owls, the nocturnal equivalent of the harrier, can often be flushed from the side of the dike while driving at dusk. They, like harriers, have

a slow and low flopping flight over the wetlands. During some winters, snowy owls come down from the Arctic and can be seen perched on the concrete duck blinds.