

July 15, 1992



a desert place

Natural beauty
through preservation

Harris's hawks

Throughout the summer months, the Sentinel is publishing its popular "A Desert Place" columns from past issues. The columns were by members of the Cave Creek Improvement Association's Desert Awareness Committee.

By NANCY LAIZURE

The Harris hawk is a handsome bird of prey that is often seen in the Desert Foothills.

As all of prey, he is totally protected.

He is at the most northern reaches of his range in our area. He's found in South and Central America, Mexico and parts of the Southwestern United States, including Texas, New Mexico and southern Arizona.

In Arizona, he's found in riparian areas where mesquite, saguaro and palo verde vegetation exists.

The hawk is medium sized, from 17 1/2 to 24 inches long.

The females are larger than the males. Adult birds are black with rufous shoulders, wings and thighs.

The tail is black with a flashy white band about an inch wide at the end of the tail. The beak and feet are bright yellow.

When you see him, his overall appearance is a dark rust color.

The immature bird resembles the adult except the underparts are streaked with white and rust.

Food consists mainly of rodents, reptiles and, occasionally, small birds. They hunt in early morning and evening hours.

Their nests are located in high saguaros, mesquite or other available trees.

Nests are made of large sticks and twigs and other available plant material and lined with grasses and unnatural material, such as cloth and plastic.

One was observed having a wonderful soft lining of lamb's wool.

Some behavior aspects of the Harris hawk are not only interesting but very unique.

It is a social hawk living in family groups which are still being studied.

During the mating season, some hawks will use a rare mating system known as polyandry. This is where two males and one female make up a family unit.

Although the female is the primary nest builder, one male helps with the nest building, feeding and brooding the chicks in addition to

hunting for the female. The second male's job is hunting food for the female.

The eggs hatch after 35 days of incubation. One of the adults is in constant attendance of the nest, either protecting the eggs or young from weather and predators.

The only other hawk known to practice polyandry is the Galapagos hawk.

The Harris hawk is also capable of laying more than one clutch per year. Three clutches have been documented. They nest from February until as late as December.

After the young hawks have left the nest, another interesting situation arises. The immature hawks join with the adults in the fall and winter to form family groups.

These groups will hunt in a cooperative effort, taking turns in chasing prey and then sharing the kill.

It is not known what happens to these family groups after the winter months.

In 1977, residents of our area became alarmed when California falconers came here and illegally trapped the hawks to take back to California.

Eleanor Radke spearheaded an effort, along with concerned citizens, the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the Arizona Wildlife Federation and the Arizona Falconer's Association, to apprehend the men who illegally took the birds.

They also convinced California officials to make it illegal to possess a Harris hawk in that state.

It was from this episode that the CCIA's Conservation Committee, now called the Desert Awareness Committee, was launched.

The Harris hawk seems to be faring well in our area, but residents who live near a nesting sight became concerned when several hawks were electrocuted on power poles.

The problem arises when their large wingspan touches two wires at the same time.

Residents contacted Arizona Public Service company and explained the problem. APS promptly responded by building tall perches atop poles in areas frequented by hawks. The hawks love them.

Thanks to special efforts by many residents and APS, the Harris hawk remains a beautiful and rewarding sight to behold in our Foothills.