

## FEATURED PHOTO

### FIRST DOCUMENTED RECORD OF THE GRAY HAWK IN CALIFORNIA

ERIC B. CULBERTSON, 4516 La Tierra Lane, Carpinteria, California 93013;  
ebc101@humboldt.edu

During the afternoon of 25 November 2012, while driving northwest along Via Real in Carpinteria, Santa Barbara County, California, I observed an immature hawk perched on a power line overhanging the road. It had a very distinctive face pattern, with a bold buffy-white throat, auricular, and supercilium contrasting with a dark brown malar, eyeline, and crown. The back and wings were dark brown, and the underparts were buffy white with distinct brown streaking throughout. Structurally, the hawk most resembled a Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*), appearing somewhat small and stocky but with a longer tail. I was able to approach on foot to within 30 yards and study the hawk more closely through 8 × 42 power binoculars, while also obtaining several photographs. Over the next half hour I continued my observation of the hawk as it foraged within ¼ mile of this area, crossing Highway 101 twice from Via Real to perch along Santa Claus Lane. During this observation I noted that the upper surface of the rectrices was brown with several dark bands. In contrast, the underside of the tail was light gray or buffy white with only a few indistinct brown bands. While the bird was perched the wingtips fell well short of the tail tip. The undertail coverts were white, and the tarsi and feet were orange-yellow. The bill was dark and hooked, set off from the face by a yellow cere. In flight, the underwing color matched the buffy-white color of the underparts but with only minimal, nearly indistinct dark streaking throughout. Its size, shape, foraging style (perch hunting), and tail length (shorter than in an *Accipiter*) made me confident in identifying this hawk to the genus *Buteo*.

From what I observed in the field, I concluded I had photographed either an immature Red-shouldered Hawk of the paler eastern subspecies *B. l. lineatus* or a young Broad-winged Hawk (*B. platypterus*). However, with identification of the bird still unresolved, I sent my photographs to Tony Leukering, who identified the hawk as an immature Gray Hawk (*B. plagiatus*), a species with no previously accepted records in California. Over the next several months hundreds of additional observers observed and photographed the hawk within ¼ mile east or west of the original observation point along Via Real and adjacent Santa Claus Lane. The bird continued to be seen in the general area through 16 March 2013 (e.g., see this issue's outside back cover, upper photo).

On 5 December 2013 the hawk was discovered to have returned for a second winter, this time in full adult plumage, and to the same area as it had used previously during the winter of 2012–2013. In 2014 it remained in the area through 22 March. On 29 November 2014 it returned for its third consecutive winter (this issue's outside back cover, lower photo), this time remaining in the area only through 2 February 2015 and not seen thereafter, suggesting that it may have met an untimely demise. It did not return for the 2015–2016 season. The California Bird Records Committee has accepted all three records as records 2012-193, 2013-225, and 2014-155 (Pike et al. 2014, [www.californiabirds.org](http://www.californiabirds.org)).

Several characteristics observed in the field, also shown well in photographs, helped establish its identity in 2012–2013 as a Gray Hawk in immature plumage. These include (1) wingtips that fall well short of the tail tip (not the case in either the Red-shouldered Hawk or Broad-winged Hawk), (2) the bold face pattern, and (3) the tail pattern with a wide pale terminal band (not including the pale tip) that is unlike the tail patterns of both Red-shouldered Hawk and Broad-winged Hawk (Millsap et al. 2011).

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Equally important in reaching a conclusive identification as a Gray Hawk in immature plumage was distinguishing it from the allopatric Gray-lined Hawk (*B. nitidus*). Differing in plumage, structure, and calls, it was split as a species from the Gray Hawk by Millsap et al. (2011) and Chesser et al. (2012) and replaces the Gray Hawk from Costa Rica south to Paraguay and northern Argentina. It is believed to be largely resident. Millsap et al. (2011) discussed plumage features distinguishing these two taxa in all sex and age classes. Those observed in the juvenile plumage of the Gray Hawk at Carpinteria included (1) a dark brown crown and dark malar stripe (*B. nitidus* shows a buffy crown with incomplete brown streaking and lacks a malar stripe), (2) a mostly white breast and belly with narrow dark streaking (in *B. nitidus* dark splotches replace thin streaking over similarly colored underparts), (3) the dark brown upper surface of the primaries, visible in flight, where *B. nitidus* shows a large light buffy patch, (4) a darker brown base color to the upper surface of the rectrices with narrow dark bands (in *B. nitidus* the base color is much lighter and the bands are wider), and (5) the white upper tail coverts with dark shaft streaks visible in flight (in *B. nitidus* the upper tail coverts are buffy). While not always visible in the field, an interesting distinguishing character is the banding on the feathers covering the tibial portion of the leg of the Gray Hawk; the tibial feathers of the Gray-lined Hawk are unmarked at all ages.

The Gray Hawk occurs from southeastern Arizona, southern New Mexico, and southern and western Texas south through Middle America to northwestern Costa Rica (Bibles et al. 2002). In the southwestern U.S. and northern Mexico most Gray Hawks are migratory. In contrast, Gray Hawk populations from central Sonora southward are nonmigratory (Howell and Webb 1995). Wintering individuals are rare within the northern portion of the range, though there are many records at this season for the lower Rio Grande valley in Texas and in southern Arizona (Bibles et al. 2002).

In northern Mexico and the southwest U.S. Gray Hawks occupy riparian woodlands and associated mesquite (*Prosopis* spp.) woodland, scrub, and grassland along major watercourses. Historically, they nested in mature woodlands of mesquite, cottonwood (*Populus* spp.), and netleaf hackberry (*Celtis reticulata*) (Bibles et al. 2002). Extensive woodcutting and ground-water depletion throughout the southwestern United States beginning in the late 1800s removed much of this habitat. Destruction of habitat coincided with the species' decline in much of its range in the U.S. (Bibles et al. 2002). But since the 1960s its range has expanded north, beginning with the recolonization of the Santa Cruz and San Pedro river valleys of Arizona, continuing into western and southern Texas during the 1970s and 1980s, and reaching southwestern New Mexico during the 1990s (Williams and Krueper 2008). Northward expansion was coupled with a spread to elevations higher than previously recorded, reaching close to 1760 m in the Huachuca Mountains of Arizona and 1600 m in the Davis Mountains of Texas (Williams and Krueper 2008). Additionally, recent records have come from the northern Mexican Plateau within interior northern Mexico, where the species was historically unrecorded (*N. Am. Birds* 57:408, 61:337, 61:519). Within the U.S. Gray Hawks currently nest in large cottonwoods and willows (*Salix* spp.), and forage in adjacent mesquite scrub (Bibles et al. 2002), and even more recently have been found in oaks (e.g., in Madera Canyon, Arizona; M. Stevenson in litt.).

Range expansion within Arizona has brought the species east through Cochise County, northeast to the vicinity of San Carlos Lake (Gila River drainage), north to the vicinity of Roosevelt Lake (Salt River drainage), northwest to the vicinity of Phoenix, and west into the Baboquivari Mountains (Williams and Krueper 2008). Recent reports from Yavapai County in northern Arizona include a single bird found at Bridle Creek near Bagdad 16 March 2012 and a second bird near Humboldt 27 April 2012 (Corman and Tomoff 2012). More recently in Yavapai Co., a vocal, likely nesting pair of Gray Hawks was along Date Creek northwest of Wickenburg 13–16 July with a juvenile later observed at this location 16 August 2013 (Corman and

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Tomoff 2013a). A pair of vocal Gray Hawks along Agua Fria Road near Humboldt 19 August 2013 also suggested breeding (Corman and Tomoff 2013b). This area is due west of Prescott and roughly 90 km east-northeast of the mouth of the Bill Williams River on the Colorado River.

Until the acceptance of this Santa Barbara County record from 2012, the California Birds Record Committee designated Gray Hawk's occurrence in California as hypothetical on the two unaccepted sight records from Marin County: 16 June 1984 at Bolinas (Roberson 1986) and 10 May 2012 at the Marin Headlands (Pike et al. 2014). True long-distance vagrancy of the Gray Hawk also has been documented with two records from Kansas: a sight record 15–16 April 1990 from Milford Reservoir, Geary County, and of a bird photographed 20–30 October 2005 in a residential area of Wichita, Sedgwick County ([www.ksbirds.org/kos/kbrc\\_summary.htm](http://www.ksbirds.org/kos/kbrc_summary.htm)).

I thank Tony Leukering for initially identifying the hawk to species from my photos and for his great comments on its identification, John Sterling for inviting me to write this paper, and Philip Unitt, Peter LaTourette, Paul Lehman, and John Sterling for their reviews.

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Back cover: "Featured Photos" by © Eric B. Culbertson of Carpinteria, California, and John Sterling of Woodland, California: (upper) Juvenile Gray Hawk (*Buteo plagiatus*) at Carpinteria, California, 25 November 2012–16 March 2013, representing the first well-supported record of the species in California. The bird returned, in adult plumage, for two successive winters, 5 December 2013–22 March 2014 and 29 November 2014–2 February 2015 (lower). The Gray Hawk's range in the U.S. has been expanding gradually since the 1960s.