

A light-morph Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk in Solano County

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On 30 January 2004, I observed an apparent light-morph Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis harlani*) in Solano County, California. This paper provides a brief review of the status of light-morph Harlan's, details and a sketch of this sighting, and a discussion of the identification relative to Krider's Red-tailed Hawk (*B. j. kriderii*).

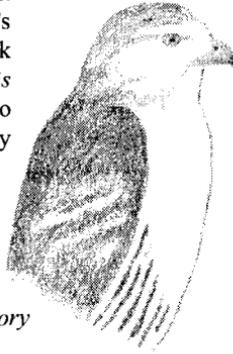
The Red-tailed Hawk is one of the most widespread and variable *Buteo* species. Found from Alaska to Panama, it includes as many as 16 subspecies, two of which occur in California (Preston and Beane 1993). Western Red-tailed Hawk, *B. j. calurus*, is found throughout the western United States and is the common form in California. It is also the most variable form, with dark-, light-, and rufous-morph birds, as well as varying intermediates. Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk, which breeds from Alaska to British Columbia and winters primarily in the southern Great Plains, is a rare but regular winter visitor to the Central Valley. Adult Harlan's are rather distinctive in appearance, with charcoal-toned upperparts and whitish tails. Some sources note that Harlan's appear in a continuum from dark- to light-morph forms. The darker morphs are most common, while the light-morph is described as "very rare" (Clark and Wheeler 1987). Other sources consider all Harlan's that are not dark-morphs (and all Harlan's with red tones in the tail) to be possible intergrades with *calurus* (Dunne et al. 1988, Preston and Beane 1993). I use the term "light-morph Harlan's" in this paper while keeping in mind this uncertain status.

I noticed this hawk perched on a power pole along Timm Rd. in Solano County, roughly between Winters and Vacaville and about 1.25 miles west of I-505. This region contains some rolling hills used as pasture. Ferruginous Hawk and Prairie Falcon are regularly found here on the Putah Creek Christmas Bird Count. After stopping my vehicle, I was able to approach within 100 m of the hawk. It then flew, but only to a neighboring power pole, providing excellent flight views. On 4 February, Gary Santolo, Julie Yamamoto, and I attempted to trap and band the bird, using a Bal-chatri trap. The bird was present on the same power pole and shortly came to the trap. Just before landing, however, it flared off and landed on an adjacent low fence, allowing for good views. Eventually, passing vehicles flushed the bird back to the power pole and, after thirty minutes, we gave up the attempt but obtained additional good views, both perched and in flight.

In size, shape, posture, and habits, the bird resembled a typical Red-tailed Hawk, though perhaps on the small side. From a distance, the perched hawk appeared superficially like a regular light-phase Western Red-tailed Hawk. Closer inspection, however, revealed that this bird was darker above

and whiter below than a typical Western, with remarkable amounts of white in the face and a primarily white tail. The forehead, supercilium, throat, and much of the auricular area were bright white, broken by prominent dark post-ocular and malar stripes. Likewise, the underparts and underwings were primarily bright white, with no buffy wash whatsoever. The white underparts were broken by dark well-defined vertical streaks on the flanks and, to a lesser extent, the belly. The underwings were observed only briefly, but were primarily white with limited dark markings. The upperparts were a cold charcoal brown-gray, lacking the warmer brown tones of *calurus*. White spots on the upperparts were few. Due to the distance of my observations, I was unable to examine the fine details of the upperparts. The tail was the most striking feature of the bird. From above, it was primarily white with orange-red tips. Orange color faded up the rectrices, but was completely gone by one-third to one-half of the way up from the tips. The uppertail coverts were likewise primarily white, with limited dark barring. In flight, the predominantly white tail was striking. The underside of tail was not seen well. See my sketch of the bird (Figure 1). Bird #4 at <http://www.martinreid.com/buteos1b.html> provides photographs of a very similar individual from Texas.

Figure 1. Apparent light-morph Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis harlani*) in Solano County, 30 January 2004.



sketch from memory
by Steve Hampton



My initial impression was that the bird was a Krider's Red-tailed Hawk. Indeed, the bird closely resembles the illustrations of Krider's in Clark and Wheeler (1987). Krider's Red-tailed Hawk, which breeds in the northern Great Plains and winters south to the Gulf Coast, was recognized as a valid subspecies by the AOU in 1973. However, the status of *kriderii* as a valid subspecies is now questioned (Preston and Beane 1993). Many consider it a highly variable "extra-light" color morph of *borealis*. It is rare within its range, where *borealis* is the predominant form. There are no well-documented records of *kriderii* in California, or in the West in general. However, there are at least three reports in the state, including two that include photographs (J. Morlan and J. Schmitt pers. comm.).

Separation of Krider's from light-morph Harlan's requires some care. There is apparently overlap in tail pattern. The bird I observed had a tail virtually identical to what is usually illustrated for Krider's, and unlike what is usually illustrated for Harlan's. However, Harlan's tails are highly variable and may be predominantly white, may contain reddish tones, and may lack gray marbling (B. Wheeler pers. comm.).

The amount of markings on the underparts is a useful, though not necessarily definitive, field mark. Light morph Harlan's have streaking across the belly that is highly variable. It may be extensive. Some sources state that Krider's are entirely white below and do not have streaking (Clark and Wheeler 1987). However, others note that many otherwise pure Krider's may have some streaking across the belly (J. Schmitt pers. comm.).

Perhaps the most useful field mark is the tone of the upperparts. Harlan's, in contrast to other forms of Red-tailed Hawk, have cold charcoal-toned upperparts, with some white spotting. Krider's have warmer brown upperparts with extensive white spotting, described as "mottled white and tan" (Dunne et al. 1988). These warmer tones are especially present on the head (J. Schmitt pers. comm.). Krider's also tend to show more white on the head, often including a white crown. Based on the coloration of its upperparts, the bird I observed was most likely a light-morph Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk and not a Krider's Red-tailed Hawk.

I am aware of only three other reports of possible light-morph Harlan's in California: one from Los Angeles County in the 1960s (J. Schmitt pers. comm.), one seen on a Sacramento Audubon Society field trip 6 mi. NE of Marysville, Yuba County, on 27 November 1999 (Bruce Webb pers. comm.), and one seen along Sankey Road at Hwy. 99 in Sutter County on 23 February 1993 (T. Manolis pers. comm.). Inquiries for other records or recollections have yielded no additional reports. The winter of 2003-4 was exceptionally good for Harlan's Red-tailed Hawks along the western edge of the southern Sacramento Valley. At least three different dark-morph birds wintered in scattered locations along the west side of Yolo County (personal observation). Two of these birds (at Roads 85 and 13, and at Road 93B) had been present in previous winters.

LITERATURE CITED

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