



Newsletter

Fall 2023 www.friendsofwhitfield.org

Ribbon of Gold

The Cottonwood trees that anchor the WWCA light-up the dusky fall sky with their brilliant, flaxen leaves. But these silent sentinels are more than just another pretty face. (story on page 3)

Ribbon of Gold at the edge of the northwest forest at WWCA.
Photo: Laura McCann

Letter from the FOW Board

Greetings Friends!

The Cottonwood trees are a staple of New Mexico, and of course here at Whitfield we have our share of these magnificent beauties. But there’s more about this tree than meets the eye as VSWCD’s Environmental Education Manager, Laura McCann, shares in her feature article in this newsletter.

We’ve had some recent events that have brought lots of folks to Whitfield such as the Desert Willow and Pollinator Festival and the Solar Annular which itself had 150 folks watching the solar eclipse of the sun.

And just recently we had our Whitfield Under the Stars event which was attended by 150 people. It warms our heart to see that the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area is finally getting on the map. But there’s more that we can do as our volunteer coordinator, Frank Mazza, has noted in his column.

Speaking of visiting Whitfield, now that the weather has cooled off, its a perfect time to come on out to Whitfield, enjoy a brisk walk and watch the hustle and bustle of nature as it prepares for it’s winter nap. The Sandhill cranes are making their way back so put on the hiking boots and come enjoy this beautiful, living enhanced wetland. See you here!

Friends of Whitfield
Board of Trustees



Friends of Whitfield Board of Directors

Mission Statement:

Friends of the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Complex (FWWCC) is a non-profit volunteer organization dedicated to supporting the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Complex by promoting habitat restoration, education and conservation.

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frankmazza@friendsofwhitfield.org

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lauramccann@valenciaswcd.org

Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area

is located at 2424 Hwy 47, Belen, NM
<https://goo.gl/maps/AKxgnLJGgKD3za7t8>

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Cottonwood Trees: The Rio Grande Bosque's Ribbon of Gold

by Laura McCann, VSWCD Environmental Education Manager

Some people love them, others have their complaints about cotton and falling branches. Regardless of our feelings about them, Cottonwood Trees have been growing along the Rio Grande for countless generations.



Golden Cottonwood leaves form a beautiful contrast against an enchanted NM blue sky. Photo: Laura McCann



Closeup of Cottonwood showing their triangular or heart-shaped leaves. Photo: Laura McCann

We refer to these forests along the river using the Spanish word “bosque” which means “forest.” One intriguing feature of this stately tree is no two look exactly alike. Their branches form at various angles and in unique patterns. They

are lovely in their green summer foliage, their golden

autumn finery, and even in the winter as a leafless silhouette against a colorful New Mexico twilight sky.

Before giving more specifics about Cottonwood Trees, let's explore their role as a “keystone” species in the Rio Grande Bosque. Like an actual keystone at the top of an arch that holds the other stones in place, a keystone species is an organism that creates balance and anchors the ecosystem, so to speak. If a keystone species is removed, the ecosystem is substantially affected. Cottonwood Trees in the Middle Rio Grande Bosque are a keystone in this ecosystem in several ways. First, mature Cottonwood roots stabilize riverbanks and hold the soil where microorganisms can flourish and benefit other plants. Next, the canopy of mature Cottonwoods helps reduce heat in the summer and hold soil moisture **which can reduce** the impact of droughts. Cottonwoods young and old also provide forage and shelter for diverse species of animals. Deer and elk will browse on Cottonwoods. Some birds, such as hawks and crows, build elaborate stick nests in their branches. Other birds that are cavity nesters, such as woodpeckers and Western Screech Owls, love to use hollowed out

Cottonwood branches and trunks to rear their young. Both beavers and porcupines will eat Cottonwood bark for nourishment. The porcupine and racoon climb high into Cottonwood Trees to rest during the day. Even the leaf litter that falls each autumn is critical for other species in the bosque.

Soil microorganisms incorporate the organic matter into the soil. Furthermore, mice and insects consume this plant material for energy. The leaf litter that falls into the river becomes food for caddisfly



Cottonwood leaf litter at WWCA provides food and shelter for mice and other critters. Photo: Laura McCann

("Ribbon," continued from page 3)



Cottonwood Ribbon of Gold along the Rio Grande in Northern NM. Photo: © 2017 Richard Miller

larvae which are a food source for many fish species in the Rio Grande.

Now that we have a good visual picture of how interconnected Cottonwood Trees are with other organisms in the bosque, it's time to learn about how this amazing tree sprouts, grows, and colonizes along the Rio Grande. Interestingly, Cottonwood Trees are dioecious. That is, a tree is either male or female, instead of having both reproductive parts on the same tree. When someone sells you a "cottonless" Cottonwood tree, it is probably just a male specimen. How can you tell a male from a female? Well, in the early spring a male Cottonwood will display red clusters of pollen called "catkins." The female trees will produce a green cluster of seeds in the spring that will break open in the early summer to release the cottony seeds. This fast-growing tree can grow up to six feet per year, and it takes about five years for the female trees to **start producing seeds**. The cotton of the seeds is easily carried on the wind or in water to **establish in** new territory. Since these trees are flood-adapted, the seeds need to land on very moist soil **or standing water** in order to germinate. Historically, a group of trees was usually established after a flood event where the conditions were perfect for a multitude of seeds to germinate and grow. As the flood waters receded, the young trees continued to push their new roots deeper into the soil where the moisture remained. A group of Cottonwood Trees that establish at the same time is called a "cohort." Some of our older Cottonwoods



This male Cottonwood survived the 2022 Big Hole Fire and is now the oldest living Cottonwood at WWCA.

Photo credit: Laura McCann

at Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area (WWCA) and around Valencia county are cohorts that coincide with historic flood events. However, the northeast forest of Cottonwoods at WWCA along the Kandy Cordova Trail are a cohort that was **not established by a flood, but rather were** planted by dedicated volunteers! It is important to note that Cottonwood seeds are only viable for about two weeks, so if they do not fall on

(continued on page 5)

Volunteer News - Fall 2023

by Frank Mazza, FOW Volunteer Coordinator

The Friends of Whitfield have been very busy these past months since the last newsletter was published. Summer and early fall are a time of festivals and special events and our volunteers manned a table or attended the Desert Willow and Pollinator Festival and Solar Eclipse viewing at Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area, the Sunflower Festival in Mountainair, and Rio Abajo Days and the Scare Crow Festival in Belen.

There is a wonderful library at the Whitfield visitor center that is dedicated to works of nature, ecology, plants, bird and animal identification, and conservation. FOW volunteers recently relocated the library to make it more accessible.

Volunteers continue to assist Laura McCann, Education Manager, as field trip volunteers at the conservation center when Laura conducts the field portion of her environmental education program for elementary school students. Several folks have also helped to assemble a nature journal that students are given when they participate in the education program. Laura can always use more guides and would like to assemble more journals. If you'd like to help, contact her at:
EducationManager@valenciaswcd.org.

The Ambassador program continues to be a tremendous asset to the staff at the Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District staff who do their daily work at Whitfield. Ambassadors greet the public from the front desk, answer the phone, and free up staff in a way that allows them to focus on their work without interruption. While we generally have Saturdays covered, we'd like to be able to expand to other days of the week.

The FOW board of directors continues to meet once a month on the second Saturday from 10:00 – 12:00. Due to a recent resignation the board has a vacancy that we're anxious to fill.

While we have a dedicated corps of volunteers, we can always use more. I usually send out an appeal for

volunteers once a month in an email. The response generally is minimally effective. What I'd like to create is a list of people who have given me their phone number and permission to call them to help with a specific activity or event. If this is something of interest for you, please contact:

Frank Mazza, Volunteer Coordinator,
FrankMazza@friendsofwhitfield.org or 802-772-5068

Did You RENEW?

As a member your support directly impacts
the work we do for the

Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area.

It's easy to renew or become a new member
by registering on our secure website at:

<https://friendsofwhitfield.org/become-a-member/>

("Ribbon," continued from page 4)

wet soil they will not germinate. Once the Rio Grande was straightened and leved in the 1930s, the Cottonwood bosque became limited to just the adjacent riverbanks. In other words, its ability to use flood events to establish cohorts farther from the Rio Grande is now not possible. Fortunately, many people that love this tree have chosen to plant Cottonwoods on their property. They are popular because they grow quickly, make great shade trees, are heat tolerant, have gorgeous golden fall foliage, and their leaves rustle musically on a breezy day. If you do decide to plant one, or even a small cohort, make sure you do not plant the tree too close to your house or septic system. Large branches can damage a home if they fall, and the surface root system of a Cottonwood can damage a sidewalk or foundation. These trees grow easily from cuttings due to their soft **water-absorbent** wood. The Valencia Soil & Water Conservation District can supply you with a cutting for planting from our large supply of **young** Cottonwoods at WWCA. Just stop by **in early spring** and see our Conservation Program Manager, Johnny Chavez, and he can help you out! 🌱

“Monsoons: Better late than never”

by Andrew Hautzinger, VSWCD District Director

The September arrival of monsoon moisture to the Isleta Reach of the Middle Rio Grande Valley is a welcomed late addition to the unique story that is the 2023 water year. After a July and August with almost no rainfall, the phrase I kept hearing was: “Whew, these monsoons are sure better late than never!”. Which made sense, as come mid-summer the water use community had been informed that monsoons would be the primary source of late season irrigation water, while there were predictions that the Rio Grande was likely to go dry through the Albuquerque reach for a consecutive year (something not seen for forty years). Yes, after a dry July that registered as the hottest month on record, these late season rains are well received and add nicely to the story of 2023, a real roller-coaster of a water year.

A brief recap of this unique topsy-turvy irrigation season recalls the Rio Grande going from predicted severe shortfalls from a low snow pack in the early months of 2023, to an almost unprecedented period of months where the river was swollen with higher than average flows, to recent weeks where pernicious drought conditions seemed to be back in force (awaiting rescue by the always mercurial monsoon rains).

What a year it’s been. People will long remember how on May 14, 2023 high flows contributed to a sinkhole that undercut the Los Lunas Highway 6 Bridge, collapsing the sidewalk with Sergio Marquez, with his son Felix nearby, only narrowly escaping drowning (owing to the bravery of passersby Heaven Chavez-Rodriguez and her mother Jacque Rodriguez). These higher flows were due to late-spring snows in the highlands, a cooler than average May and June, and a host of contributing challenges associated with water storage and compliance with the Rio Grande Compact (established in 1938 between the states of Colorado, New Mexico and Texas).

The Rio Grande Compact is a prominent actor on the stage (and found to be a little inscrutable by many), as

the Compact restricts many things, including the storing of water for most of New Mexico’s summer irrigators, unless Elephant Butte Reservoir is at or above a 400,000 acre-foot volume of “native Rio Grande” water (water that naturally falls within the basin)—noting that the butte’s current volume is ~358,644 ac-ft (and that New Mexico’s debt to the Compact was 93,000 acre-feet at the end of 2022).

Water storage is a key and paramount consideration: From another prominent actor on the stage, the Middle Rio Grande Conservation District (MRGCD), we know that a lack of upstream storage is a significant constraint on operations, especially during times of drought...and during times when dam repairs are needed. MRGCD estimates that repairs required at their El Vado Reservoir won’t be done until as later as 2027, so this facility (built by MRGCD in 1935 largely to store irrigation water) is off line for the time being. This, with the high flows of the late spring and early summer, added to the vexation of local farmers who felt their parched farmlands could make use of the swollen river water, only to understand that the water was already spoken for (largely by our downstream Compact neighbors in Texas).

On July 1 another important player on the stage, the US Army Corps of Engineers, ceased high releases into the river (born from the late snow pack), reducing flow levels in the river, allowing the slow draining of the upstream reservoirs and flooded off-channel areas that have held water since the spring. Meanwhile, during July and early August MRGCD used the full volume of its San Juan-Chama project water (tributary water sourced from the Colorado River and not considered “native Rio Grande” water in compact accounting). Come late August, MRGCD’s CEO Jason Casuga was letting people know that the San Juan-Chama waters that had been representing about 40% of the flow in the river and were now depleted and monsoon moisture would likely be needed to support late-season irrigations (Albuquerque Journal, 8/20/23).



Hello! My name is Allison Martin and I am the new Executive Director for TOTAL NM. (Teaching Outdoors to All Learners) We are a brand new nonprofit that just launched to help foster outdoor classroom spaces and places at schools for students to learn outside. This is a unique opportunity to help teachers get comfortable with teaching outdoors, find classroom management strategies to utilize outdoors, and of course, create and grow outdoor spaces at schools so everyone benefits!

Our organization is seeking funding for pilot projects to work with local and statewide schools and organization leaders that support outdoor opportunities for schools.

We had a wonderful first community event where we got to gain new insights and ideas to start our first project!

Below are some of the highlights from that first meeting!

- Direct teacher and classroom support for modeling how to take the students outdoors
- Classroom management in the outdoors
- Highlight NM schools and the Living Schoolyards Act
- Working with other agencies to help support teachers to grow these spaces
- Student and teacher voices about the value of outdoor classrooms
- Working with schools and supporting organizations to grow and enhance outdoor programs at schools and at organizations to grow outdoor classrooms and integrate outdoor learning into the curriculum

- Professional development opportunities for teachers and administrator

Stay in the “Know!”

- If you are interested in joining our Advisory Board team, please enter your information on our website [HERE](#) and we will contact you shortly.
- If you would like to stay in the “know” about the work we are doing, please subscribe [HERE](#).

Please feel free to reach out to me anytime at allison@totalnm.org. We are excited to get started on our journey to see more outdoor classroom opportunities! 🌿



(“Monsoons,” continued from page 6)

So now, better late than never, the late season monsoons have arrived (in their always spotty fashion), helping local farmers and those charged with protecting the ecological function of the river and her floodplain. These late rains come after a unique year, where early predictions of continued drought gave way to river banks swollen for weeks-on-end, which then turned to the hottest July on record with negligible rainfall through August, raising real fears of present drought. Or, as my friend Anne Marken (MRGCD Water Operations Manager) told me: “Our spring predictions and preparations really won’t mean much most summers, *unless* we can manage within the Compact and gain more storage at El Vado Reservoir and elsewhere”.

Birding in Season: The Red-tailed Hawk

by Laura McCann, VSWCD Environmental Education Manager

Fall is in the air in Valencia County, and so are soaring Red-tailed Hawks! Although range maps will show that this bird species is all over New Mexico year-round, they do tend to have a short distance migration in the state. Here in the Middle Rio Grande Valley, we see these raptors return each autumn to stay with us through the winter. Around the first week of April, the adults will migrate to the foothills and mountains of New Mexico to breed. Sometimes juveniles will hang out in our area through the spring and summer since they are not yet ready to start a family. To clarify, a juvenile bird is not a baby. It is full-grown and the same size as its parents; it is just not yet sexually mature. Juvenile Red-tailed Hawks can be distinguished from adults by their feathers and eye color. They usually have whiter breast feathers, a striped tail instead of a copper one, and lighter eyes (if you are able to see them). Both adults and juveniles, when seen from underneath while soaring, will have a belly band of darker feathers and dark “armpits,” or patagium marks, on the wings. This distinguishes them from other hawks in the “Buteo” genus, such as Swainson’s Hawks or Ferruginous Hawks.

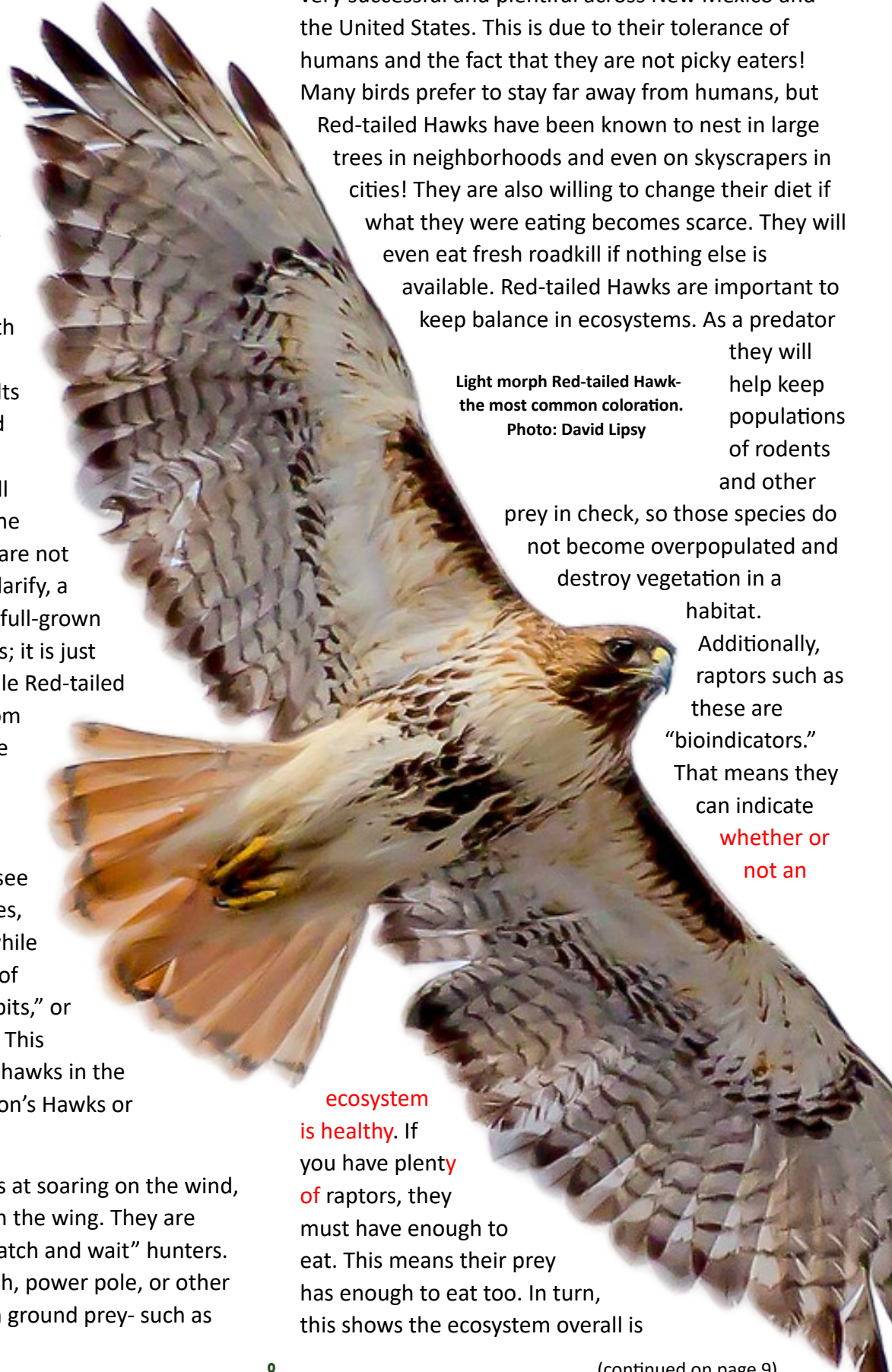
These large raptors are masters at soaring on the wind, but they do not **usually** hunt on the wing. They are what is often referred to as “watch and wait” hunters. They will perch on a tree branch, power pole, or other high spot then swoop down on ground prey- such as

mice, rabbits, squirrels, or quail. This species of hawk is very successful and plentiful across New Mexico and the United States. This is due to their tolerance of humans and the fact that they are not picky eaters! Many birds prefer to stay far away from humans, but Red-tailed Hawks have been known to nest in large trees in neighborhoods and even on skyscrapers in cities! They are also willing to change their diet if what they were eating becomes scarce. They will even eat fresh roadkill if nothing else is available. Red-tailed Hawks are important to keep balance in ecosystems. As a predator they will help keep populations of rodents and other prey in check, so those species do not become overpopulated and destroy vegetation in a habitat.

Light morph Red-tailed Hawk- the most common coloration.
Photo: David Lipsy

Additionally, raptors such as these are “bioindicators.” That means they can indicate **whether or not an**

ecosystem is healthy. If you have plenty **of** raptors, they must have enough to eat. This means their prey has enough to eat too. In turn, this shows the ecosystem overall is



("Red-tailed hawk," continued from page 8)



Krider's subspecies has very light coloration.
Photo courtesy: World Bird Sanctuary

healthy. Healthy ecosystems are best for humans, too!

Although this article gives ID markers above, it is important to note that this species is often misidentified because there are a variety of color **morphs** and subspecies. The most common coloration, which I described above, is the light **morph**.

These birds as adults have buff-colored breast feathers, a belly band of darker feathers, and copper (aka red) tail feathers. There are also intermediate **morph** birds (with brownish-red breast feathers) and dark **morph** birds

which have dark brown body feathers. Interestingly, **adult Red-tailed Hawks all still have at least some copper on their tail feathers!** A very light coloration subspecies is known as the Krider's Red-Tailed Hawk. The Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk is **another sub-species with different coloration**. No matter the variety, spotting a Red-tailed Hawk perched or soaring in the wild is quite a thrill! 🦅

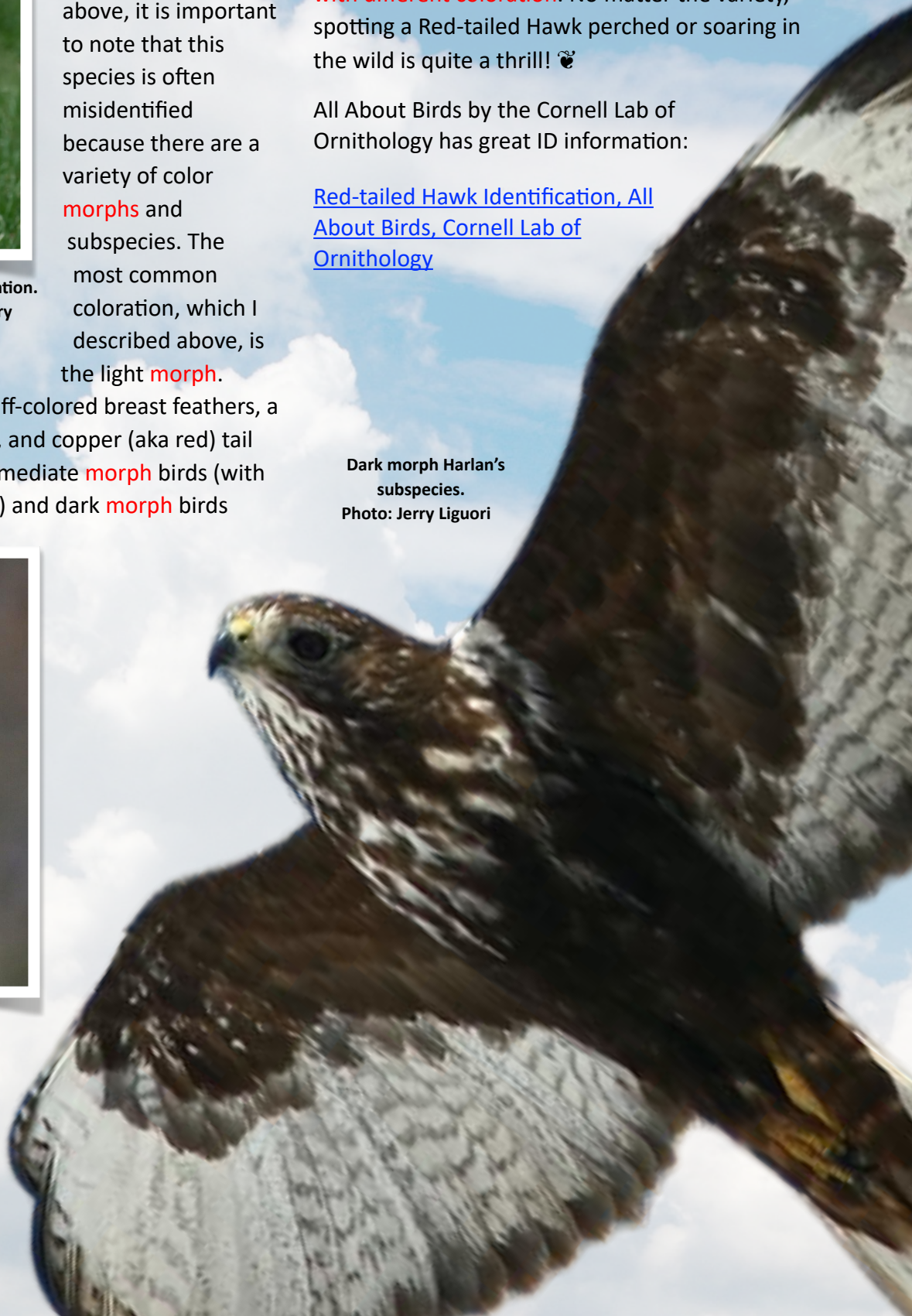
All About Birds by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology has great ID information:

[Red-tailed Hawk Identification, All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#)

Dark morph Harlan's subspecies.
Photo: Jerry Liguori



Juvenile Red-tailed Hawks have light eye color and striped tail feathers.
Photo: Jonathan Eckerson 2016





HOW TO HELP AN INJURED BIRD

If you find an injured bird, carefully put it in an appropriate size cardboard box with a lid. (Don't give a small bird too much room, or a big bird not enough room). Next, place the box in a warm, dry, and quiet place inside. Do not poke holes in the box! The bird can see through these and become stressed. Don't worry; they can breathe through the cracks. Do NOT give the bird food or water. Birds often go into shock when injured, and their bodies are not ready to eat or drink.



Within 24 hours, get the bird to a licensed Wildlife Rehabilitator. If you do not know who is legally permitted to rehabilitate birds in your area, contact your state's wildlife authority. They should have a list of individuals or organizations with proper permits. In New Mexico, you can contact the New Mexico Department of Game & Fish:



www.wildlife.state.nm.us
(505) 476-8000

If a bird has hit a window and is still alive, it may just need a little time to regain its senses, then may be able to fly away. Just keep cats, dogs, or humans away from the bird until it is safely on its way. Remember, it is **ILLEGAL** to rehabilitate wildlife without a permit. THANK YOU for doing your part to help rescue an injured bird and transport it to a Wildlife Rehabilitator!





Your grocery purchases can help keep a local Valencia County treasure alive and thriving!



The Friends of Whitfield have teamed up with Smith's to provide an easy way for YOU to support the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area.

Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area is the only conservation area in Valencia County. Nestled along the Rio Grande in Belen, this 97-acre tract of enhanced wetlands not only serves as a resting place and home to over 200 species of birds but also to hundreds of native plants, shrubs and trees

One of the ways you can help is through Smith's Inspiring Donations program. It makes donating to Friends of Whitfield easy based on the shopping you do every day. Once you link your Smith's Reward Card to Friends of Whitfield, all you have to do is shop at Smith's and swipe your Shopper's Card. Here's how it works:

1. Create a digital account.

A digital account is needed to participate in Smith's Inspiring Donations. If you already have a digital account, simply link your Shopper's Card to your account so that all transactions apply toward the organization you choose. If you don't have a digital account, click [HERE](#).

2. Link your Card to our organization.

Selecting the organization that you wish to support is as simple as updating the Smith's Inspiring Donations selection on your digital account.

1. Sign in to your digital account.
2. Search for your organization [here](#). The name to search for is: **Friends of Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area**
3. Enter the name or NPO number of the organization you wish to support. **Our NPO number is: US071**
4. Select the appropriate organization from the list and click "Save".

Friends of Whitfield will also display in the Smith's Inspiring Donations section of your account. If you need to review or revisit your organization, you can always do so under your Account details.

3. The Friends of Whitfield earns.

Any transactions moving forward using the Shopper's Card number associated with your digital account will be applied to the program, at no added cost to you. Smith's Inspiring Donations will donate 0.5% of all eligible spending to organizations that customers have linked to their Rewards Card.

If you have any questions, please contact Smith's [Customer Service Center](#).

