

CONSERVATION

Nesting success: Tracing Swainson's Hawks' 2023 life cycle at Denver's Bluff Lake

Jason B. Bidgood

Swainson's Hawks are a common summer sight across Colorado and the Denver metro area — soaring, hunting and nesting amongst us. And now, from observations made throughout the 2023 season at Denver's [Bluff Lake Nature Center](#), we can piece together the entire life cycle of this annual mid-year resident. In fact, the well-documented presence of this year's nesting pair of Swainson's Hawks stretched from their spring courtship through the late-summer fledging of three apparently healthy juveniles.

Observations and data were plentiful this year. Sightings were reported during the nature center's First Saturday bird walks, on a number of Denver Field Ornithologists field trips, and in other individual encounters on eBird. And if we look back through observations recorded on eBird over the years, it's likely that there has been a Swainson's nesting pair at Bluff Lake in every breeding season since at least 2011. In the 12 seasons since, at least one person has reported seeing a juvenile Swainson's at the nature center during summer or noted the hawks' nesting activity on their eBird checklists.

Before then, Swainson's Hawk observations at Bluff Lake were very sparse. But many more reports and data have become available as the popularity of both eBird and the nature center have grown. (Bluff Lake sits on the east-central edge of the bustling Central Park neighborhood, former site of Denver's old Stapleton International Airport.)

Flying north from wintering grounds in South America, Swainson's Hawks arrive at the nature center sometime in April. After a brief courtship, they start building their nest, usually in the same general area in the large cottonwoods that line the south side of the lake (nest location for at least 8 years now.). This year, a Swainson's pair was first seen on April 24. Within four days, nest building was confirmed (birds noted on April 28 carrying sticks to one of the trees).

On First Saturday bird walks over the next five weeks (May 6 and June 3), my birding group observed what was probably the female in her nest. Female Swainson's Hawks, which typically lay one to four eggs, do most of the incubating. Males cover the eggs only briefly while the female is away to

Continued on page 20



Adult Swainson's Hawk at Bluff Lake Nature Center, April 28, 2023
Jason Bidgood



Adult Swainson's soaring over Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR not far from Bluff Lake
Jason Bidgood



Parent and one chick in Bluff Lake nest on July 1
George Ho Jr.



Three Swainson's juveniles
around the nest on Aug. 5
George Ho Jr.



Recently fledged juveniles
perched at Bluff Lake on Aug. 27
Jason Bidgood

feed. Egg laying would have occurred about every other day, with the five-week incubation period starting immediately. So this year's hatchlings likely began to emerge by mid-June.

On July 1, during another First Saturday bird walk, we saw a fluffy white nestling poking its head up above the edge of the nest. On July 9, two nestlings were reported, and on July 30, three. By Aug. 5, on the next First Saturday bird walk, we observed the three young birds looking almost fully grown. One was still in the nest, but its two siblings were now branchlings, perched on tree limbs above the nest. We also spotted the parents on the north side of the lake, a few hundred yards from the nest.

During a visit three weeks later (Aug. 27), I saw all three juveniles out of the nest on nearby perches. This is the key milestone for young birds: Fledglings! The three were almost constantly calling for their parents, who at first were nowhere to be found. Later that morning, both adults returned to the area. The intensity of the fledglings' begging calls increased when their parents came into view.

Among Swainson's Hawks, juveniles continue to be fed by the adults for the first four to five weeks after fledging. After that, they leave the nesting territory and are on their own. But barely a week after my previous sighting, I was disappointed not to see any of the hawks during the nature center's Sept. 2 First Saturday bird walk. It appeared they had already moved on.

But three fledged young is above average for a successful Swainson's Hawk nest. Two fledglings are more typical. The number of fledged young is thought to correlate directly with the available food supply.

With nesting and fledging complete, Swainson's Hawks prepare for their very long-distance migration south to wintering grounds in the pampas region of Argentina. The journey begins in mid- to late September and runs to December. Like other raptors, these hawks migrate by day and avoid flying long distances over water. Their preferred route south runs through Mexico and Central America, then down through South America.

The pampas habitat is similar to their breeding habitat on the Great Plains. Swainson's Hawks prefer open grassland but have adapted to agricultural areas. Interestingly, their

preferred food in non-breeding season is almost exclusively grasshoppers, dragonflies, butterflies, moths, and other invertebrates.

By adding photographs, sound recordings, videos and notes about bird behavior to our eBird checklists, we can learn a lot about our local Swainson's Hawks and many other bird species. These may seem like only small, individual contributions to citizen science, but the cumulative effect is that we birders help tell a life history of birds that cannot be gleaned from mere reports of total species numbers seen on a bird walk.

A final caution: In some cases, providing details of nest locations might jeopardize nesting success. In such instances, it may be better to add observations once the young have fledged. But most of the time, additional documentation, though not required by eBird, makes our checklists more useful and interesting. It helps our understanding of the birds we see.

References

Bechard, M. J., C. S. Houston, J. H. Sarasola, and A. S. England (2020). Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), version 1.0. In *Birds of the World* (A. F. Poole, Editor). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.swahaw.01>

eBird checklists:

- [Jacques, Benjamin, April 24, 2023 \(S134915387\)](#)
- [Bidgood, Jason, April 28 \(S135584820\)](#)
- [Bidgood, Jason, May 6 \(S136376911\)](#)
- [Bidgood, Jason, June 3 \(S140335075\)](#)
- [Bidgood, Jason, July 1 \(S143239898\)](#)
- [Woon, Jonathan, July 9 \(S144039316\)](#)
- [Pera, Lisa, July 30 \(S146020747\)](#)
- [Auckland, Julie, August 1 \(S146198511\)](#)
- [Bidgood, Jason, August 5 \(S146504685\)](#)
- [Bidgood, Jason, August 27 \(S148233970\)](#)
- [Bidgood, Jason, September 5 \(S148784217\)](#)

Jason B. Bidgood, who joined DFO in 2016, is a DFO field trip leader and one of several volunteer leaders for the popular First Saturday Bluff Lake bird walks. His other favorite birding spots near his Central Park home include Sand and Westerly creeks and Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR.