

Venetucci Farm Birding Diary: Raptor Ecology, April 2019.

Text and Photos by David Rudin



Great Horned Owl on captured Red-tailed Hawk nest, 3-7-19

Walking through Venetucci Farm's Coyote Willows, an area thick with those namesake willows, I can just make out the Red-tailed Hawk nest high in a surrounding cottonwood. The last couple of years the hawks fledged several young from this nest. As I focus in on the platform of sticks, I can just make out two feathered tufts blowing in the breeze. A Great Horned Owl. Looks like another hostile takeover on the farm.

Raptors are predatory birds with sharp eyes, hooked beaks and strong talons. Eagles, Hawks, Kites, Falcons and Owls are all raptors. So far, 17 raptor species have been chronicled on Venetucci farm. The last few springs Swainson's Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks and Great Horned Owls have vied for hunting territories and nests, sometimes violently.

The farm provides ideal habitat for raptors with large trees along Fountain Creek to nest in and open fields to hunt over. Reoccurring conflict includes Swainson's Hawks dueling in aerial "dog fights" with Red-tailed Hawks. And, most likely during the night, Great Horned Owls have commandeered Red-tailed Hawk nests and are the chief suspects in a possible attack of an active Swainson's Hawk nest.

Great Horned Owl aggression isn't all bluff. In one case at Pinello Ranch, I found a severed Red-tailed Hawk wing on the ground, at the base of a tree housing a nest, recently taken over by Great Horned Owls.



Red-tailed Hawk on nest, 3-18-19

This year at Venetucci, so far, there are two confirmed Great Horned Owl nests, one Red-tailed Hawk nest and one as yet unclaimed nest. With Swainson's Hawks just starting to arrive back in the area, after spending the winter on the pampas of Argentina. Things should be heating up soon.



Great Horned
Owl Nestling,
4-15-19