

By **BUNNY SMITH**  
Variety Editor

When the floodgates on the Wakarusa came down and the waters of Clinton Lake began to swallow the land, dozens of families were driven from their homes.

But some creatures are just naturally more stubborn than others, and it takes more than an inundation to force a family of red-tailed hawks from its accustomed nesting place.

It's a stubbornness that has a lot to do with instinct and perhaps a little with tradition. For when a hawk builds a nest, it's home sweet home forever.

"A red-tail may have alternate nests in its territory, and it will return to one or the other of them year after year," explained James Bee, Kansas University professor emeritus of systematics and ecology. "Some nests that have been securely anchored have been used as long as 10 years."

**THAT'S THE** upper limit of a red-tailed hawk's lifespan, Bee added.

Red-tails customarily build their nests in thickets of towering trees — the higher the better for observing prey — near open fields, Bee said. The black willow in which this nest was built once fit that bill. Now, with Clinton's waters swirling some 20 feet below, this territory hardly seems ideal, but these hawk parents have returned there from their wintering grounds in northern Texas, Louisiana or Mississippi nevertheless.

As more and more fishermen, boaters and waterskiers invade the waters below their aerie, these hawks may eventually

abandon this site, to build again somewhere offshore. But not this season. The 2-month-old fledglings who have in recent days tried their wings outside the safe confines of the nest will soon be off in search of territories of their own.

**FIRST, THEY** will be taught to hunt by their parents, who will circle above them and then, with a closing motion of their wings, swoop down near the prey intended for their young to find. It is a lesson that will be learned very quickly, for red-tailed hawks are formiddable hunters by nature, Bee explained.

"A hawk will sit on its perch for hours, then when it sees its prey, it'll dive down at last," he said. "They do miss, but not very often."

Their prey are mainly rodents — especially small field mice — small rabbits, squirrels, frogs and snakes — even the deadly diamond-back rattlesnake. Rarely will a red-tail become a nuisance to man, killing fowl or livestock, Bee said.

"It's really a shame. There are some hawks that feed primarily on birds and chickens," Bee said, "but the hawks that suffer are these red-tails, which are 95 to 100 percent beneficial to the farmer. They're innocent."

Distinguishable by its distinctive rust-red tailfeathers and hoarse, descending shriek, the red-tail and all other hawks are now protected from the vengeance of man by federal law, Bee pointed out. In fact, Bee said, the appearance of these birds is becoming fairly commonplace today for those who know what to watch for.

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Photos by Kent Van Hoesen

# Hawks return to nest

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There are few more thrilling sights for the birdwatcher than the hawk on the wing as it soars thousands of feet overhead, riding on the warm thermals of the earth's atmosphere.

Man has long revered the hawk, as evidenced by Egyptian hieroglyphics of favored royal falcons. It is perhaps their regal appearance — the

beak proudly curved downward in a fashion the ancients considered the height of physical beauty, the eyes focused straight ahead with deadly aim — which inspires such awe in man. Consider the appellation "eyes like a hawk."

"We think of ourselves as such a very evolved organism," Bee said, "but when it comes to eyes, we're very primitive in comparison."

Whether he's hunting with shotguns, poisoning with pesticides or flooding with new reservoirs, man is the hawk's biggest enemy, Bee said.

"Any other animal would think twice about trying to disturb a hawk," he said. "But man, he's the outstanding culprit."