Northern Goshawk
(*Accipiter gentilis*)

**MEASUREMENTS:** The Northern Goshawk has a body length of 19 - 27 inches, a wingspan of 3 - 4 feet, and weighs 1 - 3 pounds.

**HABITAT:** The Northern Goshawk inhabits forested regions of the Northern Hemisphere. This goshawk prefers coniferous forests, but will also inhabit deciduous and mixed forests from sea level to subalpine areas. This bird may also be found in urban forested parks.

**DIET:** This hawk mainly hunts small to medium mammals and birds. Goshawks often hunt at forest edges from a hidden perch or patrol flights. Prey is usually caught on the ground.

**REPRODUCTION:** The nest is built of sticks in a tree next to the trunk. Goshawks lay 2 - 5 eggs that are incubated 35 - 38 days. The young birds fledge at about 5 - 6 weeks, depending on the sex of the bird. Males develop faster than females. The young birds become independent of their parents at 10 - 11 1/2 weeks of age.

**NAME DERIVATION:** The scientific name comes from the Latin words *accipere*, meaning to take or seize and refers to a hawk or bird of prey, and *gentilis*, of nobility. The common name is derived from “goose hawk” and northern refers to the bird’s northern range.

**INTERESTING FACTS:**

- Goshawks have been prized for many centuries as a falconry bird for their speedy pursuits and fearless demeanor.

- Goshawks frequently reuse the same nest for many years. If they do not use the same nest, then they at least breed in the same area. This hawk is also habitual in the non-breeding season and will return to the same wintering location year after year.
Description and Natural History

The northern goshawk is a fairly large hawk often identified by the blue-grey plumage found on its back and wings, long tail, remarkable flight skills, and unwavering tenacity. This raptor’s most arresting physical feature may be its fiery eyes; always bright with intensity. The fervent and swift predatory qualities of this natural hunter, along with its power and prowess command awe. They often sneak up on their prey, killing them sometimes by utter shock. While most hawks search and dive for their prey over open meadows, goshawks delve through wooded areas and even pursue their prey by foot; determined to win the chase.

This species can be found in the forests of the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada, the Pacific Northwest, southeast and central portions Alaska, most of Canada, and the northeastern United States. Goshawks prefer mixed habitat to provide for both nesting and foraging needs. They also prefer old-growth and mature forests for nesting. Up to 6,000 acres of forest are needed by a pair of nesting goshawks to rear their young. The goshawk depends on our nation’s forests for protection from weather and from predators, and to provide a good prey base.

Although abundant throughout the world, the northern goshawk has declined or been extirpated from much of its historic range in the United States. It has vanished from southern and central California, and significantly declined in northern California, Oregon, and Washington. With the rapid logging of old growth from New Mexico to Washington State, this species is threatened by further population reduction. A subspecies called the Queen Charlotte goshawk lives in the dark rainforests of Alaska and most likely in western Washington and Oregon. Many attempts have been made to list this subspecies as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, but to no avail. A second subspecies, the Apache goshawk, has adapted to the dry sunny forests of New
Mexico and Arizona. It too has been impacted by intense logging. Because of its tenuous status, the goshawk is now listed as a sensitive species on most of the forests in the West.

**Threats to the Goshawk**

The intense logging of our nation’s old-growth forests is the primary reason for the decline in nesting habitat, thus imperiling the persistence of this unique bird. The decline of old growth especially in the Western United States has removed much of the goshawk’s home. Furthermore, fire suppression, road building, clearcutting, and catastrophic fires have all led to a reduction in preferred goshawk habitat. When we fragment our national forests by building roads, clearcutting, and adding infrastructure, we reduce the ecological integrity of our forests, thus imperiling this vulnerable raptor.

The decline in goshawk populations will impact a variety of other species. Not only does the decline of goshawks indicate that other old-growth dependent species will decrease as well, but they are important members of the food web. The goshawk’s absence will impose a trajectory upon the entire system. Furthermore, goshawk’s nests are used by threatened and imperiled species such as the great grey owl and spotted owl. These species will be negatively impacted if goshawk populations plummet. In essence, the decline of goshawks will cause a domino effect upon other forest dependent species.

**The National Forest Management Act Helps to Protect Goshawk Populations**

Currently the Forest Service is required to evaluate and maintain healthy populations of this species under the National Forest Management Act (NFMA). Unfortunately, management decisions on our national forests are still leading to the decline of goshawk populations. We need to strengthen, not weaken important wildlife protections in the NFMA planning regulations. Without strong wildlife protections, management of our national forests is likely to eliminate goshawk habitat in multiple national forests.

Wildlife protections in forest planning have been instrumental in helping to manage for the persistence of the goshawk.

In 1999 the goshawk was listed as a sensitive species in the Forest Service’s Northern Region. The goshawk is also listed as a sensitive species on many national forests throughout the West. Due to this designation, these forests are now mandated to monitor the status of this species and evaluate how projects will impact their populations. Many forests have taken the initiative to amend their plans to better comply with the needs of the goshawk.
For instance, although the Queen Charlotte goshawk has not been listed under the Endangered Species Act, the Forest Service, through the intense efforts of concerned activists and biologists, developed a better forest plan in the Tongass National Forest. This 1999 plan specifically addresses goshawk habitat requirements, thus helping to better ensure its persistence on this forest.

Likewise, the forests of the Southwestern Region have amended their forest plans using the goshawk, listed as a sensitive species, in the planning process. This has resulted in the development of better forest plans that use the best available science to address the needs of this forest dependent species.

All of these efforts, made possible under NFMA, will help to aid in the persistence of this unique and impressive forest dweller. Without this mandate, the future of this species is dubious.