

Buteogallus meridionalis (Savanna Hawk)

Family: Accipitridae (Hawks, Kites and Eagles)

Order: Falconiformes (Diurnal Birds of Prey)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Savanna hawk, *Buteogallus meridionalis*.

[http://www.avesderapinabrazil.com/heterospizias_meridionalis.htm, downloaded 16 November 2014]

TRAITS. The savanna hawk is a large raptor 46-61cm long, with broad, long wings and a relatively short tail and long legs. Weight is 825-1070g. Colour rufous (reddish-brown), with mostly grey on its upper back and cinnamon below (Fig. 1). Its wings are rufous with its feathers tipped with black. The immature birds are dark brown with spots of rufous on its wings. Both sexes are similar in colouration but the females are larger than the males. Formerly known as *Heterospizias meridionalis*.

ECOLOGY. Neotropical, breeding from Panama to Argentina, including Trinidad (but not Tobago). Found in low lying habitats such as savannas, the seaside, the edges of forests, the dry

parts of marshes and swamps, and can also be seen on the side of roads and highways. Usually perches on vantage points such as power lines, posts, and the tops of trees or can be on the ground. Forages as well as displays hunting behaviour, is an opportunistic hunter. Preference is shown for wide open spaces where prey can be easily spotted.

FEEDING BEHAVIOUR. Feeds on a large range of animals such as smaller birds, lizards, crabs, toads, large insects, eels, snakes, roots and small mammals. Catches prey by diving from flight or from a low perch like a post, or forages from the ground while walking. Can also be seen following grass fires or farm equipment, sometimes in large groups, to feed on the small animals that would be flushed out and has also been documented feeding on road kill such as snakes and frogs. Also seen perched on low branches near fires supposedly to pick off large insects and lizards that are running from or injured by the fire. Prey is also sometimes stolen from smaller predator birds. Smaller prey such as lizards and frogs are taken back to nests. If the food is plentiful, many savanna hawks can be seen circling the area of in the case of fires and machinery cutting grass, walking behind the fire of machine or perched on a low branch nearby.

BREEDING BEHAVIOUR. Nests in the earlier months of the year in Trinidad and the nests are constructed in palm trees or relatively low trees. The breeding season may vary according to the rainy season of their geographic location for example the nesting period is later on in the year for South America. The nests are made of sticks and lined with grass, they are reused each year. The nesting birds claim hunting and soaring spaces around the nesting site as a territory. This allows them to better be able to protect their young. One or in rare cases two eggs are laid and incubation takes at most 39 days. The eggs are bluish-white and some have been reported to be white with cinnamon spots and the eggs are usually about 55-60cm x 46-49cm. The adults communicate with each other by continuously whistling to each other. The chick has all of its feathers and is able to fly by 45-50 days after hatching but is dependent on its parents for around 4-7 months after they hatch. This long period of fledgling care is used to compensate for the low survival rate of most chicks. Foods such as frogs and lizards have been documented as to be taken back to the nest to feed the young bird. Eggs and young chicks are preyed upon by arboreal mammals like monkeys, snakes, and other larger predatory birds, if this occurs early on in the nesting season the pair of mates can nest again in around two months.

COMMUNICATION. Can usually be seen alone or in pairs and on rare occasions, when there is plenty food can be seen in large groups. During breeding season, two or three hawks can be seen soaring. They shriek and bring nest materials to attract mates. When alarmed the feathers at the nape become erect which resembles a crest. The nesting pair also constantly shriek at each other to establish where they are at all times and to ensure the safety of their egg or chick. The pair also stay together during the duration of the maturation of their young.

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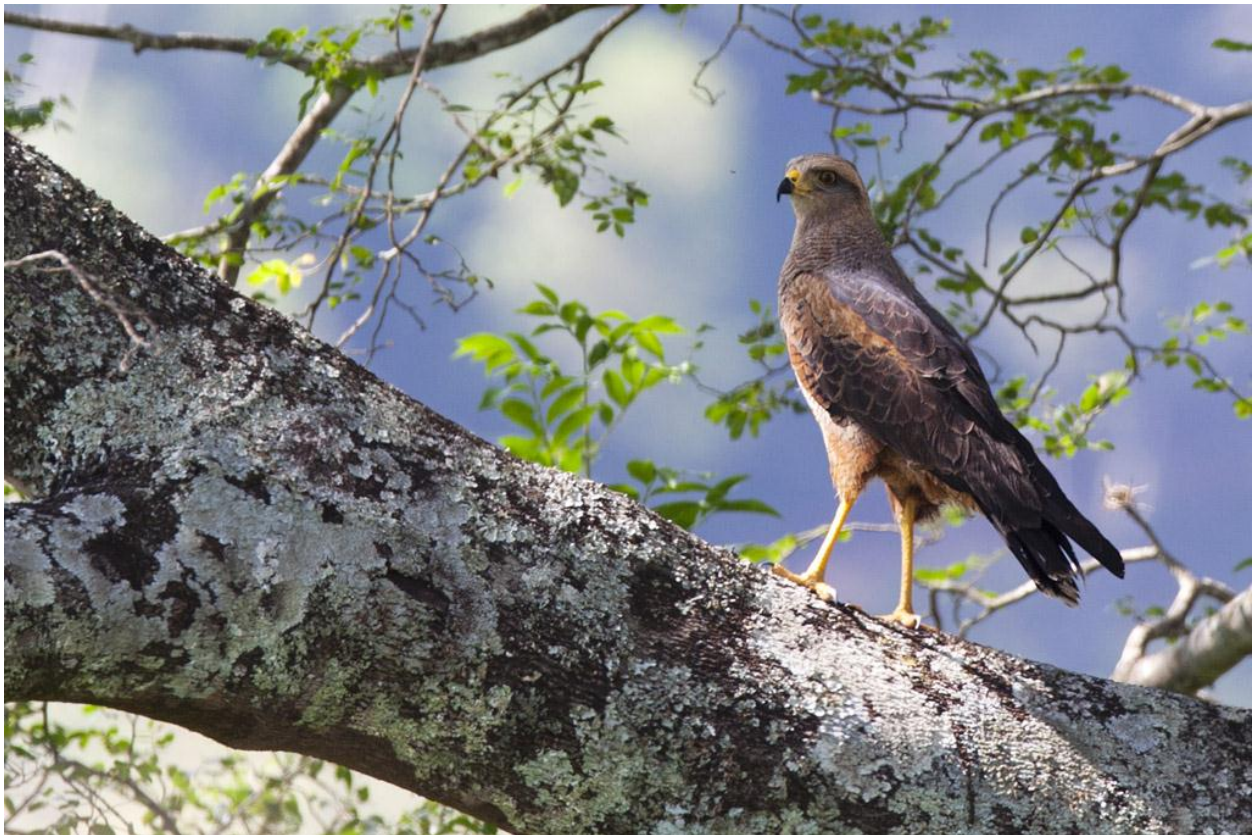


Fig. 2. Savanna hawk perched in tree.

[http://focusingonwildlife.com/news/passarinhando-no-brasil-27-28-october-2012-ibiraci-mg/heterospizias-meridionalis-ibiraci-28-10-12-img_29511/, downloaded 16 November 2014]



Fig. 3. Savanna hawk in flight.

[<http://www.planetstillalive.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Savanna-Hawk1-1024x688.jpg>, downloaded 16 November 2014]

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