

RAPTORS and RODENTS OF MICE AND BIRDS



Rodents form the staple diet for many raptors, or birds of prey. A family of barn owls may devour 2,000 rodents over one spring and summer. With that kind of appetite, it's easy to see why raptors are valued for keeping rodent populations in check. But even when abundant, rodents aren't always visible to raptors soaring high above. Suburban development and closely spaced orchards degrade the habitat, and may make it impossible for these birds to find enough prey to feed their young.

Rodents live just about everywhere, and their members comprise over 40 percent of all mammal species. One secret to their success is specialized front teeth, which grow continuously and self-sharpen as the animal bites down. Rodents use their teeth to dig burrows, gnaw wood, defend themselves, open nut shells, and get to other hard-to-reach foods. The order Rodentia (meaning "to gnaw") includes mice, rats, squirrels, gophers and voles.



White-tailed Kite

A year-round resident in California, the white-tailed kite eats mostly California voles, a type of meadow mouse. Vole populations naturally fluctuate, soaring one year and plunging another. White-tailed kites, entirely dependent on their prey, prosper or decline accordingly.

Northern Harrier

The northern harrier surveys grasslands, flying very low. Its owl-like facial discs—stiffened feathers that funnel sound toward the ears—allow it to hear the slightest rustlings in the vegetation, and suggest that this hawk is adapted especially for hunting rodents in open grasslands and marshes.



Burrowing Owl

Tunneling rodents create extensive underground networks. The burrowing owl is the only North American raptor to nest underground. In California this owl uses the abandoned holes of ground squirrels. Once widespread, the burrowing owl is steadily declining. Urban and agricultural development and rodent exterminations destroy habitat, and pesticides poison burrowing owls.

