

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK

Some birds are heard more often than they are seen, and Florida's most common hawk is certainly one of them. The shrill, piercing scream of the Red-Shouldered Hawk — “kee-yar, kee-yar, kee-yar” — is one of those sounds that causes a person to stop and try to find its source. Sometimes the hawk is soaring in the sky directly overhead; sometimes it's perched on the limb of a pine or oak; and sometimes it's sitting on a fence post or telephone pole. But once in a while, the scream comes not from a hawk but from a blue jay, one of nature's most accomplished imitators.

The Red-Shouldered Hawk is a medium-sized raptor, with a body about 1 1/2 to 2 feet and a wingspread between 3 and 4 feet. It's one of our country's most beautiful birds of prey. The underparts are covered with rich, rusty-red barring, and the back with black and white checkering. The shoulders are rufous-red and the tail has distinctive, alternating black and white bands. In flight, a pale crescent, or "window", can be seen on each wing when viewed from below.

Although it can be found in just about any habitat in Florida, from pine forest to residential neighborhood, the Red-Shouldered Hawk's preferred homes are cypress swamps and wet forests along rivers. They often perch on limbs hidden in the forests and then launch themselves down onto their prey: frogs, small birds, rodents, large insects, and — especially — snakes. In late winter, our resident Red-Shouldered Hawks begin raising their young. Look for their bulky stick nests in the

main fork of a tree, about halfway up the trunk.