

# Identification Notes for wildlife law enforcement

CATEGORY: BIRD

Scientific Name/s: *Falconiformes, Strigiformes*

Common Name/s: Eagles, Hawks, Falcons, Owls

## Recognizing the Feet and Talons of North American Birds of Prey

### Part I. Key to the Major Groups

The detached lower legs and feet of birds of prey are common evidence items in wildlife cases. The following key summarizes the distinguishing characters of the legs and feet of the major groups of North American birds of prey.

#### A. Toes feathered (either thickly or with sparse, hair-like feathers); outer toe reversible: OWLS

I. Lower leg (tarsus) long; toes with sparse, hair-like feathers.  
Comb-like edge on middle talon: **BARN OWL**

II. Lower leg (tarsus); usually short;  
toes often thickly feathered. No comb on middle talon: **TYPICAL OWLS**



#### B. Toes not feathered; outer toe not reversible

I. Hind toe (hallux) weak and elevated; hallux claw small and blunt:  
**NEW WORLD VULTURES**



II. Hind toe (hallux) powerful; hallux claw large and strongly curved:

a. Talons all approximately the same length, compressed and strongly curved;  
spiny scales (spicules) on undersides of toes: **OSPREY**



b. Talons on the different toes differ markedly in length (outer toe talon smallest)

i. Lower leg (tarsus) not feathered; network of small, irregular "reticulate"  
scales on tarsus: **TYPICAL FALCONS; KITES**



ii. Lower leg (tarsus) may or may not be feathered;  
if not, front of tarsus has plate-like "scutellate" scales:  
**HAWKS, EAGLES, and CARACARAS.**



Page 1 of 3