



Check The Underwing Coverts

by Jerry Liguori

I wanted to relay a message to hawk banders. All hawk banders know to look for two generations of feathers when they are determining the age of a raptor in hand, and can be helpful to look at specific body feathers, such as upperwing coverts and rump feathers. But, remember to check out the underwing coverts, especially the underwing linings. Many raptors tend to replace the underwing linings last, especially when molting from juvenile to adult plumage. Even well known birders have admitted to having difficulty determining juvenile from adult underwing coverts, but I urge bird banders to look for this in-hand. It's actually pretty obvious telling juvenile from adult underwing coverts on some species, especially adult male Harrier, Northern Goshawk, Mississippi Kite, Gray Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, and Gyrfalcon to name a few.

Check out these adult male Harriers (images #1-3 -- note the last in-hand Harrier lacks retained feathers for comparison, so the age is simply "adult"), adult Goshawks (image #4), adult Peregrine (image #5), and adult male Hen Harriers (image #6), the difference in the 2 Hen Harriers is quite striking, the plumage is identical but the brown juvenile feathers of the bird on the right are extremely obvious since the underwings lack the spotted look of adult male Northern Harrier. Anyway, note the juvenile feathers (brownier ones that differ in pattern) that stand out from the adult feathers on the second-year Northern Harriers and Goshawks. This is not obvious on Peregrines since the juvenile and adult patterns are similar (note the retained juvenile flight feathers that confirm the age of the Peregrine in Image #5).

Remember to look for this next time you have an adult hawk in hand and can't find any signs of molt...you might find some retained juvenile underwing feathers.



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© Michael O'Brien

Image #1



© Zach Smith



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Image #2



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Image #3



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Image #4



Image #5



Image #6

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