

ON THE WILD SIDE

Silent and swift visitors: the small hawks

Linda S. Kollett

The feeders were busy this morning. Little brown birds were hopping on and off the feeder bar, adjusting their collective weight so that it would stay open. Cardinals and mourning doves were scratching away at the feeder base, and chickadees and finches were flitting in and out. A generally cheerful sight. And then, some jays screeched and all of a sudden, everything went quiet. The English sparrows and chickadees retreated to the forsythia at the edge of the garden and the other birds flew off to cover in the shrubs and trees bordering the yard. I looked around at the edge of the field that touches my back yard, and sure enough, high in a tree I saw the silhouette of a hawk!

Red-tailed Hawks are a familiar sight soaring above fields or sitting in trees along the highways. Other large hawks in the area include Red-shouldered Hawk and Broadwing Hawks, but the hawk sitting quietly above the yard waiting for an unsuspecting bird to venture out into the open is most likely a Sharp-shinned Hawk or a Cooper's Hawk.

The Sharp-shinned Hawk is small with rounded head and a long barred tail. The tail is squared off at the tip. Sharp-shinned Hawks view bird feeders as fast-food restaurants and swoop down and snag an unsuspecting bird so fast that it's hard to see what is happening. They have become so good at this that some birders suspect that it has had an effect on their migratory patterns; many are electing to stay north, close to feeders and an easy dinner.

The female Sharp-shinned hawk is much larger than the male and has lighter bars on its tail. Juvenile Sharp-shinned hawks are trained for speed by their parents in a bird version of "tough love". Food is offered to them from adults in flight. The first juvenile to reach the food gets it!

I easily confuse Sharp-shinned Hawks with Cooper's Hawks! Whenever I think I have seen one, my ornithologist friend asks a few questions and then tells me with no uncertainty that I have seen a Cooper's Hawk. Cooper's Hawks are slightly larger than Sharp-shinned Hawks, with broad shoulders, a larger squared-off head and larger feet. They also have a rounded rather than a squared-off tail. They fly in typical hawk fashion with a few wing beats and then a glide. As described at the Wild Birds Backyard Count website (<http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc>) these hawks are hard to distinguish. The pictures reprinted here, taken by Johann Schumacher, can help you identify them.



Cooper's Hawks are at home in the deep forest, chasing rapidly after prey in the tallest trees (the canopy) and they are comfortable in suburban yards, hunting for dinner at the



bird feeders. The female is particularly fond of medium-sized birds, and mourning doves are a favorite. This makes life a bit precarious for the smaller male Cooper's Hawk who must approach the nesting area carefully to avoid becoming part of a meal. Cooper's Hawks are also able to fly swiftly close to the ground and have been seen chasing a bird into a bush! This is a dangerous strategy. Cooper's Hawks skeletons often have healed bone fractures, particularly in the chest area.

While we often like to cheer for the prey, we need to take time to consider the role of the predator, who needs to eat. There are many examples of ecological problems resulting from the removal of a predator from an area. Unfortunately many stories like to humanize animals and often incorrectly display the prey as cute and desirable and the predator as evil.

We need to keep in mind that both are a part of the food web, playing their roles in our ecological system. Hawks eat many other things besides birds at feeders and are a part of the complex interrelationships among organisms in our environment. We do, however, need to keep in mind that if we plan to attract birds to feeders in our yards, we must also provide them with cover so that they have a way to protect themselves from the hunt.

For more information about supplying cover for birds and small mammals, visit our web site www.nortonlandpreservation.org or go to the National Wildlife Federation website: www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx. Please join us and the National Wildlife Foundation by registering your yard as a Certified Wildlife Habitat.

Linda S. Kollett is a member of the Land Preservation Society of Norton and of the Wild Backyards of Norton Team. You may contact Linda or the team leader, Kathy Ebert-Zawasky at zawasky@comcast.net