

Cooper's Hawk



Accipiter cooperii

Help! All the birds at my feeders have disappeared! We hear this lament quite a few times during the winter. Sometimes, the culprit is a beautiful Cooper's Hawk. As distressing as it may be to have a hawk preying on "our birds", the Cooper's Hawks are magnificent birds.

Cooper's Hawks are a medium sized hawk, about the size of a Crow. They are "accipiters", a North American group of hawks that has only three members: Sharp-shinned, Cooper's and Northern Goshawk. Accipiters have very long tails and short rounded wings compared to other hawk families. Their shape affords them great agility to pursue prey through the woodlands they inhabit. They are some of the world's most skillful fliers.

And yes, their main prey is other birds. Cooper's Hawks will also eat small mammals such as squirrels and mice. We mostly see them in the winter, because during the breeding season they tend to stay in open woodlands and can be quite difficult to spot.

So how do you identify a Cooper's Hawk in your yard? They vary quite a bit in size. Their length can be 14-20 inches long

and their wingspan 29-37 inches wide. As with most birds of prey, the female is larger. Cooper's Hawks have one of the biggest differences in size between the sexes. The female is almost $\frac{1}{3}$ larger than the male. Adult's backs are steely blue-gray. Tails are marked with thick dark bands and are much paler on the underside. Their chests are white with many fine, thin reddish bars. A distinct black cap tops their colorful features. That cap is often raised a bit, giving their large head an almost flat look with a bit of a crest. If you get a close-up look, the adult's eyes are an astonishing bright red or deep orange. Their rather small bill is hooked, and looks very efficient.

Juvenile Cooper's Hawks may not show adult coloring for two years. Their cap is brown, and overall they have brown backs and chests with thin black streaks. The juvenile's eyes are yellow. The smaller Sharp-shinned Hawk is very similar in appearance, and it can be difficult to distinguish between them. Sharp-shinned Hawks are rather uncommon in our area, so most of the hawks we see that look like this are Cooper's Hawks.

Cooper's Hawks were in serious decline during the 1950's and 1960's. DDT affected them and most raptors the same way it did our Bald Eagles and Peregrine Falcons. The better known Eagles and Falcons got a lot of attention, which is fortunate. The banning of DDT and conservation measures to increase their populations has greatly helped all the raptors.

I personally have a love affair with Cooper's Hawks. There were no records of Cooper's Hawks nesting in Cerro Gordo County after 1960. In 1998 a pair nested in my woods! Their nest was high in a Burr Oak tree, but quite visible. We got to watch the young being fed, and as they "branched" out from the nest we saw them testing their wings!



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There was only one down side to this marvelous experience, but it was also the reason I found the nest. Cooper's Hawks prefer to nest near the edge of woodlands. This pair chose to nest on the edge of a fairly wide grassy strip that bisects my woods. I frequently walk through this meadow between the trees. Cooper's Hawks are usually rather quiet birds, except around their nests. I guarantee that having a large hawk screaming "Kac Kac Kak" and diving at your head is very disconcerting.

We occasionally have a Cooper's Hawk visit our feeders at our store. When it first flies in, the feeder birds scatter. The hawk will then generally sit motionless on a convenient branch until the other birds forget it's there. An amazingly fast dive sometimes gets it dinner. Of course as we watch this drama of nature, we're silently chanting "get a House Sparrow, miss the Cardinals"!

Cooper's Hawks can be very aggressive. We have a dense brush pile near our feeders, and I've seen a Cooper's Hawk actually stalk into the pile after sparrows that I couldn't even see.

Although their main diet is birds, Cooper's Hawks will also catch squirrels. I once watched one chasing a squirrel around and around through the treetops. I didn't see who won the race, but it was an amazing display of flying ability.

One of the funniest episodes I've seen also involved a Cooper's Hawk and a squirrel. The hawk was perched near the end of its favorite branch. Our resident Red Squirrel took violent exception to the hawk being there. Out on to the branch the little squirrel would stomp, chattering and scolding as it went. About two feet from the hawk it would chicken out, stop cold and then race back to the tree trunk. The Cooper's Hawk sat motionless while the squirrel charged him four or five times.

I guess the hawk had finally had enough. As the squirrel made its last run out on the branch, the hawk slowly turned its head and looked at the challenger. Game over! Wow, did that squirrel run!

So, what can you do if a Cooper's Hawk is scoping out your feeders? Nothing! Well, you can admire this beautiful bird. They are a part of nature's delicate balance. Also, they usually move on fairly soon. If they stay longer than you have patience, let your feeders go empty for a few days, and your yard should no longer interest them.

It's always a Happy New Year when a bird that's been missing for decades returns.

JANUARY BIRD NOTES

We haven't seen many Red-breasted Nuthatches the last few years but happily, there are quite a few around this winter. Watch your peanut and suet feeders for this charming visitor.

Pine Siskins and Common Redpolls haven't been visiting our feeders yet, but they may show up later.

Believe it or not, Great Horned Owls will be nesting this month. They need an early start. It takes a long time to grow to be a wise owl.

Suet is one of the best things you can put out for the birds this time of year. It provides the protein that birds need, and your Chickadees, Nuthatches and Woodpeckers will love it.

Enjoy your birds!
Ellen S. Montgomery

