

Living with Washington's Wildlife: Hawks

(Editor's note: This edition's excerpt from WDFW biologist Russell Link's new book, "Living with Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest," covers a few of the most commonly seen hawks in Washington backyards.)

Hawks belong to a group of birds called raptors, or birds of prey, including eagles, falcons, ospreys, and owls. Raptors are powerful birds with sharp, curved talons for capturing prey and strong hooked beaks used for grasping and tearing flesh. All have an excellent sense of hearing, and their eyesight is the best in the animal world.

Washington provides a wide variety of habitats for raptors, including seven species of hawks that fall into two main groups: Accipiters and Buteos.

Accipiters are the forest-dwelling hawks, characterized by short, rounded wings that enable them to accelerate rapidly, and a long, rudder-like tail for steering around trees. Their flight pattern consists of several rapid wing beats, then a short gliding flight, followed by more rapid wing beats. The Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) and sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), are the two most frequently observed Accipiters in Washington.

The Buteos are known as the broad-winged or soaring hawks. All Buteos have long, wide wings and relatively short, fanlike tails. These features enable them to soar over open country during their daily travels and seasonal migrations. The red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) is the most common and widely distributed Buteo in Washington.

Adult Cooper's hawks are bluish-gray with brownish-orange horizontal bars on the breast and three black bands across the tail. An adult female is 14 to 20 inches tall with a 28-inch wingspan. The tail is longer and rounder than that of the sharp-shinned hawk.

The sharp-shinned hawk is almost identically colored but the typical female is 13-1/2 inches long with a wingspread of 25 inches. Males of both species are about 20 percent smaller. Because of their similar appearance, it is quite difficult to distinguish a male Cooper's hawk from a female sharp-shinned hawk.

The red-tailed hawk is a large, stocky hawk. An adult is 18 to 25 inches long with a 40-inch wingspan. Color patterns vary; typical birds have dark heads, whitish breasts with a darker bellyband, a whitish lower belly, and rust-colored tails. Young birds are duller and more streaked, and lack the rust-colored tails of the adults.

Habitat

Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks occur in areas with trees and large shrubs, including greenbelts, brushy edges of woodlands, shrub thickets and fencerows, as well as residential communities, cemeteries, and golf courses.

Red-tailed hawks occur in open to semi-open coniferous, deciduous, and mixed woodlands, grassy roadsides, rangelands, and agricultural fields with scattered large trees.

The size of a hawk's territory is variable, determined by the abundance of food and the number of available perches and nest sites. Hawks will fly several miles away from the nest in search of food.

Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks are often seen near pigeon and starling roosts and in the vicinity of bird feeders where they capture and feed on smaller birds. Less frequently, Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks eat rodents, frogs, lizards, and insects. Cooper's hawks will kill domestic pigeons and occasionally small poultry.

Red-tailed hawks are opportunistic predators and will eat anything from large insects, lizards, snakes, frogs, and turtles to voles and rodent-like mammals up to the size of a rabbit, occasionally taking poultry. They will also eat dead animals.

All birds of prey produce pellets to expel indigestible foods. When hawks consume feathers or tufts of fur along with their meal, they are not digested but are bundled into compact "pellets" and later regurgitated. Pellets are most commonly found under a hawk's favorite perch.

Reproduction and Behavior

The breeding season for all of these hawks begins as early as February,

depending on latitude and altitude. Pairs raise one brood each year. Their bulky nests can be located from 15 to 90 feet above ground in the crotch of a tree, usually near a woodland edge. Redtails often reuse an old nest, just adding a few twigs each year so that over time they may be three or more feet thick. The eggs are incubated by both sexes (mostly by the female) and hatch after 30 to 36 days.

The young grow rapidly and begin to fly at 23 days of age (sharp-shinned), 30 days (Cooper's), or 42 days (red-tailed). Juvenile red-tailed hawks may continue to associate with their parents for up to six months after they leave the nest.

Hawks will return to the same breeding territory for several years, thus staying together as a pair. If one of the pair dies, another hawk will acquire the mate and territory.

While Washington does have year-round hawk residents, some spend the winter months in warmer regions of the Pacific Northwest or further south. Spring migration begins in February and lasts until mid-March; fall movement begins in late August and ends in late October.

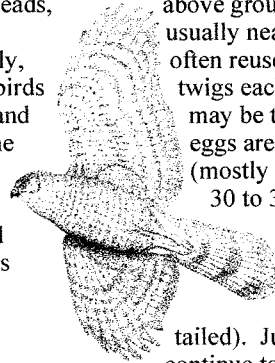
It is at these times that hawks are most likely to be seen around a bird feeder, flock of chickens, or other food source that attracts them while they are moving through. Those that remain here through the winter will also focus in on such prey concentrations.

Hawks use tall dead trees and branches as places to rest, look for prey, and feed once prey is caught. The tree's height provides the birds with a wide visual range, easy takeoff, and greater attack speed when hunting.

Where tall snags or dead branches don't exist or can't remain because of safety constraints, perch poles can be installed for hawks. This may be as simple as adding ten-foot extensions to fence posts and sprinkler risers in grassy fields, orchards, and woodlots.

Potential Problems

Once juvenile hawks have left the care of their parents in summer and fall, they enter a period where they must quickly perfect their hunting skills or starve.



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Kestrel grabs meals at birdhouses

BWS managers Trudie and Jim McFall of Auburn are used to visits from predator birds like Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks, but this year they witnessed a colorful male American kestrel grab house sparrow nestlings right out of their birdhouses.

The kestrel first landed on the front of a birdhouse, looked in, then stuck his long leg inside, pulled out a baby sparrow in his talons, and flew off with it. The kestrel came back repeatedly for the next few weeks and systematically stole at least eight young birds out of three birdhouses.

"He even took an adult female sparrow that had unfortunate timing," Trudie wrote. "She had just popped into her nest to feed her young when he swooped up, stuck his leg in and pulled her out biting and screaming. She put up such a fight

that he landed on one of our inactive birdhouses and killed and plucked her right there."

At first Trudie was upset, but ex-falconer Jim reminded her that "this is nature's way and not everyone is lucky enough to watch it happen right before their eyes." He figured that the kestrel had a nest somewhere nearby and was feeding his own brood.

WDFW wildlife biologist Howard Ferguson says that was likely the case, and notes that such behavior is normal for falcons, which hunt with their talons. "They catch birds on the wing using their feet," he said, "so reaching into a nestbox is comparatively simple."

Ferguson also notes that house sparrows are exotics that aggressively compete with native birds for food and nest space, so the kestrel was actually



"doing needed population control."

For those who want to protect birds from such predation, Ferguson recommends adding simple nestbox hole guards (block extensions) to make the entrance deeper.

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these inexperienced hunters. Once hawks discover such an easy supply of food, they can be very persistent.

Cooper's hawks will attack small farm and hobby birds; sharp-shinned hawks are less of a problem due to their small size. Red-tailed hawks are too slow to catch a bird in flight, but they occasionally prey on pigeons and free-ranging fowl and domestic rabbits.

Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks occasionally eat songbirds that are attracted to bird feeders, but a hawk will usually kill only one bird per day. The occasional foray of a hawk or falcon into a backyard wildlife sanctuary is not so much a problem as an opportunity to witness a natural food chain in action.

Hawks pluck birds and mammals, leaving piles of feathers or fur at plucking spots or on the ground. The plucked feathers can be used to determine whether a hawk actually killed a bird or was simply feeding on one that had died of other causes. If the feathers have small amounts of tissue clinging to their bases, they were plucked from a cold bird that died of another cause. If the base of the feather is smooth and clean, the bird was plucked shortly after it was killed.

While trying to catch small birds, a hawk will occasionally get caught inside a building. If this happens, turn off all

inside lights and open all windows and other exits. The hawk should leave on its own. If necessary, a long pole with a T-shirt or flag at the end can be used to direct the bird out an exit. If these methods fail, a licensed falconer, wildlife rehabilitation center, or a wildlife damage control company can be called to assist in the removal process. Call your local WDFW office for contact information.

Preventing Conflicts

A large concentration of songbirds around your feeder can attract a Cooper's hawk, sharp-shinned hawk or other raptor, especially during the winter. Predation is a natural part of a well-functioning ecosystem. Hawks weed out the unfit and thus help maintain the overall health of the songbird population. Healthy songbirds can protect themselves by taking cover quickly. To facilitate this, you can provide trees, shrubs, thickets, and brush piles.

If you have a persistent hawk or other bird of prey hunting around your feeding station on a regular basis, remove the feeders for a few days and the hawk may move on.

Hawks will quickly learn the routines on a property if they are successful at catching prey on site. If a problem occurs, people flying pigeons or allowing other

domestic birds to feed unattended should vary the routine.

By far the best defense against hawks preying on domestic birds is to house them in a durable, fenced enclosure that will allow the birds to safely eat and loaf outside during the day. Such a structure can be constructed with a wooden framework that is entirely covered with one-inch poultry wire or similar netting. This outdoor run can be permanent and attached to a coop or other building, or be portable and moved periodically.

Where a complete and permanent enclosure isn't practical or desirable, escape cover should be provided. Birds have natural defenses at the sight of a hawk and will quickly squeeze under a nearby building, shrub, or other area. Escape cover can be made of planks, plywood, or chicken wire placed over logs, rocks, or bricks.

Simply increasing noisy human activity in the area will deter problematic hawks. Or use devices, like the "hawk globe" — a round mirror designed to scare an attacking hawk. If it is placed in the flight path the hawk uses, the hawk will see its reflection and retreat, giving domestic birds a second chance. Because hawks hunt on their own, they may avoid returning to a place where they perceive competition from another hawk.