

MARCH 1 - 14, 2019 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES

By Dick Harlow

## **ARROGANT VS SECRETIVE**

### **COOPER'S VS SHARP-SHINNED HAWK**



Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk  
© National Audubon Society

Adult Sharp-shinned left, and Adult Cooper's right. Notice the size difference and shape of head. Smaller, sleeker, rounded head of the commonly called "Sharpie" vs robust, larger, and squared off head for the Cooper's. The "Sharpie" has a square tail, the Cooper's is rounded.

North America has only three species of Accipiter's that hunt in Vermont. In order from largest to smallest: Northern Goshawk, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawk. Their excellent manipulation through trees is because of their short wings and long tail. Their ability to catch prey in shrubs and bushes is due to their long legs and long slender sharp talons. Immatures have yellow eyes that change into orange and red as they become adult. The females in this group tend to be larger than the males. This becomes a problem when looking at a male Cooper's against a female Sharp-shinned. I will focus on just the Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks for this note and take up the Goshawk in a later note.

Accipiter's are a group of hawks that are traditionally considered bird hawks. In other words, their main food source is other birds. That doesn't mean they won't go after something different if it is easy, but their primary prey is birds. As a result, it is the accipiter found swooping in on an unlucky bird at your feeder. Would it also go after a mouse under your feeder? Of course, it will not look a gift horse in the mouth, but it will primarily attack birds.

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Cooper's Hawk, *Accipiter cooperii*, Immature,  
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Cooper's Hawks and Sharp-shinned Hawks, are found throughout the United States. Cooper's can be found in parts of southern Canada, whereas Sharpies are found throughout North America. Here at EastView we tend to see immatures more than adults, but occasionally one might witness an adult marauder.

The Cooper's Hawk was known as a 'chicken hawk' for its incessant attacks, during colonial times on backyard chickens. Back in the 1950's we, as a country, were beginning to get over the desire to kill hawks. Now that the various populations of hawks, both bird and mammal hawks, have recovered, as best they could, we tend to see them more often than we used to.

How do I know what I am looking at when, if by chance, a Cooper's or a Sharpie shows up at EastView?

Take size first. If you can visualize in your head the size (length is from tip of bill to end of tail) of a Common Crow (length 17.5") vs a Blue Jay (length 11"), you have approximately the size of a Cooper's vs a Sharpie. Cooper's Hawk has a length of 14-20" whereas a Sharp-shinned Hawk is 10-14". Remembering that females are larger than males, so a male Sharpie around 10" is similar to the size of a Blue Jay, and a Cooper's male at 14" is slightly under the length of a Common Crow.

When we look at a bird, we tend not to take in subtle details of tail banding, rounded or square ends to the tail, feather patterns and the like, but we will notice attitude. The way these hawks act, whether they are mature or immature, will give away who they are!

Cooper's Hawk is confident and arrogant! As long as humans don't suddenly come upon them or threaten them, they will look at you with disdain, ignore you and attend to what they are doing, whether that is eating a meal or protecting a just caught meal.

On the other hand, a Sharp-shinned Hawk will leave a kill if you are seen. They tend to be shy, secretive, sudden on the scene and quickly away they go as fast as they can with their prey if possible.

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Sharp-shinned Hawk, *Accipiter striatus*, Immature,  
© Teton Raptor Center,

If you take size and behavior as your first clues to what you are looking at, more times than not you will be correct. Of course, there are always exceptions. As said at the beginning of the note, the male of a Cooper's is similar in size to the female Sharpie. Therefore, there is a need to learn other subtleties of each species. Here are a couple.

Keep in mind the tail. Cooper's have a rounded tail. Sharpies have a square tail that is even notched when at rest. Cooper's have a larger head and a slight neck, whereas a "Sharpie" has a relatively small head and what appears to be a very small neck, sometimes appearing as if there is no neck at all. A Cooper's seems to have a crown or simply contrast between its crown (or top of head) and the back of the head.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

### **MAMMALS**

**Eastern Cottontail** – observed under conifer along with new scat

**Weasel** – scat, new feather remnants

**Red Fox** – sighted end of Deer Meadow and running along the berm of south pond by bird box poles.

**Gray Squirrel** – one around bird feeders

### **Weather Tidbits**

**Month of MARCH 1-31, 2019**

[\*All Measurements taken at solar noon \(1230 EST\).\*](#)

### **PRECIPITATION**

**Total Precipitation: 36.0 mm or 1.5 inches**

**Overcast Days: 5**