

## **Cooper's Hawk**

Cooper's Hawks may be the least recognized bird of prey that lives in the Hill Country. This hawk and his close relative, the Sharp-shinned Hawk, belong to the Accipiter family, a family of birds known for their hunting and flying skills. The name "accipiter," rooted in Latin, means "to seize." Most of their prey are birds which they grab in flight and use their sharp talons to dispatch. Accipiters have long tails, short rounded wings, and long legs, all designed to make them very efficient hunters.

One reason of the family's anonymity is that they are "sneaky" individuals that live and hide in wooded habitats. Unlike Red-tailed Hawks who perch on power poles and tree tops in the open, coopers and sharpies sit on mid and lower level tree branches. Their long tails and short rounded wings allow them to maneuver through the tree canopies in pursuit of their prey. Occasionally they will fly in tight circles above the trees searching for flocks of birds in their immediate area. Like many families of birds, they have recognized the increased value of living near humans and seem to be right at home in urban environments. Humans help them by setting up bird feeders in their back yards, particularly so in wooded areas. Almost every winter when the activity in the feeder area drops to zero for a long period, I know to look above the feeders in the tree canopy to see which accipiter is present. Or when I hear multiple collisions of birds and my windows, I know that one of the hawks has just arrived.

Because of these hawks limited fear of hanging out in neighborhoods, people have opportunities to photograph them and try to identify them. Often the photos end up on my computer with a question, "Is this a Red Shouldered Hawk?" Adult Cooper's Hawks are permanent residents in the Hill Country, while the sharpie cousin is a winter resident. The adult birds are easier to identify than the juveniles. Both accipiters have similar adult plumages, with the differences being in size and shape of the tip of their tails. Cooper's are larger and have rounded tails contrasted to the square cut tail of the Sharp-shinned Hawks.

Juveniles of both species have brown streaked breasts contrasted to the red barred breasts of their parents. Juveniles have yellow eyes relative to their parent's red eyes. The long tail should be the first indicator of the accipiter's identity. Buteo hawks, red-tails and red-shouldered, have shorter tails and will not likely be hiding in your tree canopy. Red-shouldered Hawks are also forest birds, but they prefer mammals and reptiles to birds as the food choice. Accipiters have a very erect posture while perching.

There is a popular series of photos circulating on the internet of a young Cooper's Hawk entangled with snake. The person who wrote the explanation of the event called the hawk a falcon and implied that the snake attacked the bird, an occurrence I seriously doubt. The likely scenario is that the juvenile hawk attacked the snake and got more action than he anticipated. The internet piece is interesting, even if not an accurate description of the intent of the actors.

If you are attempting to raise a few chickens in your back yard, be forewarned that a Cooper's Hawk will likely interpret your endeavor as a new chicken restaurant in the neighborhood. The Cooper's Hawk's a.k.a. is "chicken hawk." I grew up on a small farm where our chickens were regularly harassed by Cooper's Hawks, which we called by still another name, "Blue Darter." Adult Cooper's Hawks have blue backs and are very agile as they dart through the trees.

If one of the accipiters pays a visit to your back yard, keep in mind that Hawks have to eat too, and he sees your backyard as a cafeteria. Cooper's Hawks likely think of the White-winged Dove invasion of the Hill Country as manna from heaven. I hope they realize that these doves are meals compared to goldfinches being snacks.

Article provided by Bill Lindemann of Fredericksburg. Bill gave an interesting talk on woodpeckers, "Who's Knocking in the Woods" at the last San Saba Bird and Nature Club meeting.

Go outside & play and be aware of who's knocking and who's darting in the woods.