

Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii*



Folk Name: Big Blue Darter, Hen Hawk, Chicken Hawk

Status: Resident

Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Woodlands, urban and suburban woodlots

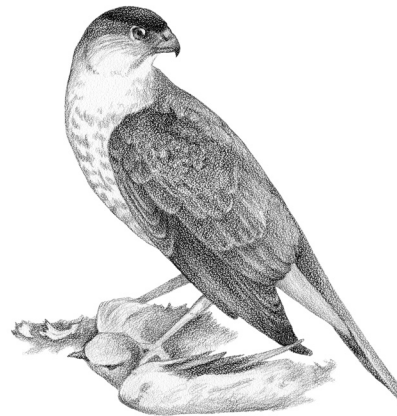
Both the “Big Blue Darter” and the “Little Blue Darter” hunt songbirds from concealed perches in woodland settings. In an instant, they dart out flying fast among the branches of trees and shrubs in hot pursuit of their prey. Both “Blue Darters” are a slate blue-gray color above, and adults are buffy white with orange-rufous barring below. When perched, the Cooper’s Hawk looks similar to the Sharp-shinned Hawk even though it is larger. It averages almost 17 inches in length which is the same size as a crow.

In addition to songbirds, accipiters prey on small animals like rats, mice, reptiles, amphibians, and even insects, at various times of the year. Accipiters are well known for visiting backyard bird feeding stations much to the displeasure of some bird enthusiasts. Observers can tell when an accipiter has been spotted as the songbirds freeze and immediately fall silent. However, many birders enjoy occasionally seeing these powerful birds cruising through, thus transforming the term “bird feeder” into a bit of a double entendre. The poet Prosonby lyrically described the arrival of an accipiter this way:

Swift o'er the tree-tops wings
the deathful hawk
And erstwhile cheerful birds
all silent fall
Cowering in the brake and bush
until at length
The hush of dread and death
is overpast
And blitheful songs again ring
through the groves.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Cooper’s Hawk was considered a common breeding bird over much of the Carolinas. However, like the Sharpie, this hawk is quite secretive during breeding season, and there have been relatively few actual records of nests. Also like the Sharpie, the Cooper’s Hawk is most abundant during the fall when migrants move down from the north.

In the late 1870s, Leverett Loomis designated this hawk as a “common” resident in Chester County. The earliest confirmation of a Cooper’s Hawk breeding in the region is a record of five eggs collected by J.C. Crawford from a nest in Iredell County on April 6, 1892. These eggs were acquired as part of a collection by J.W.P. Smithwick,



M.D., that was later donated to the North Carolina State Museum. In 1896, Charlotte businessman C.M. Carson had a Cooper’s Hawk mounted for his personal collection.

“The ‘Blue Darter’ which flew into the Ludden & Bates Music House some weeks ago and killed itself against the window, was taken in charge by Mr. Chas. M. Carson. He had Mr. Geo. Hartman to taxidermize it, and now has the bird on exhibition in his office. It is one of Mr. Hartman’s best jobs.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, February 2, 1896

Elmer Brown found the nest of a Cooper’s Hawk in Mecklenburg County near Davidson on May 17, 1932. Brown provided these details: “in a pine tree about 50 ft. up and within 150 ft. of a stream. The female bird, at least, had been killed. Two eggs which seemed to be about half incubated.”

For a wide variety of reasons, the breeding population of the Cooper’s Hawk in the eastern United States crashed in the middle of the twentieth century. This hawk became hard to find in the Carolinas, and, by 1972, it was added to the national “Blue List” of declining species. It was declared a Threatened species in North Carolina in 1977, however, the population quickly began to recover. In 1989, the North Carolina status was changed to “Special Concern,” and by 2001 it was downlisted to the state Watch List.

Today, the Cooper’s Hawk can be considered one of our “success” stories. Both North and South Carolina Breeding Bird Survey trend graphs indicate a significant population increase over the past three decades. This hawk is no longer listed on either state’s rare animal list as its population is no longer of conservation concern. Recent data from the BBS, the Carolina Raptor Center, and the

Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas, indicate it is fairly well distributed throughout this region during the breeding season.

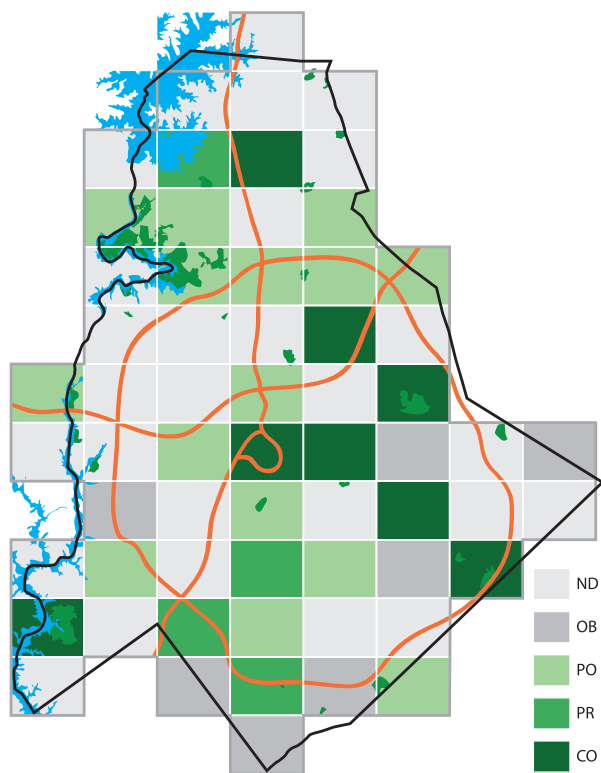
Carolina Raptor Center intake records show that Cooper's Hawks are regularly injured from collisions with various man-made objects like cars, towers, and windows. Many of these injuries are life threatening or result in permanently disabled birds. The center has treated over 1,400 Cooper's Hawks brought in from around the region over the past 37 years. In addition to collisions, many of the immature birds that arrive at the center are found to be emaciated and starving. Learning to successfully hunt can be a difficult task, even for one of these powerful predators. When their attempts at hunting fail, these young birds either starve or they may resort to scavenging or other means to survive. In January 2013,



Cooper's Hawk in juvenile plumage. (Will Stuart)

Steve Tracy reported finding two dead gray squirrels in his neighborhood in Gaston County. He placed them on his platform feeder on two consecutive weekends to see what might happen. In both instances, a young Cooper's Hawk took the prey off the feeder and flew into the shrubs next to his house to feed.

Volunteers with the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas reported hearing the *kek-kek-kek* courting call of the Cooper's Hawk in early March and active nest building was observed during the last week of March.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/4, CO/8)