

Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey



National Conservation Area

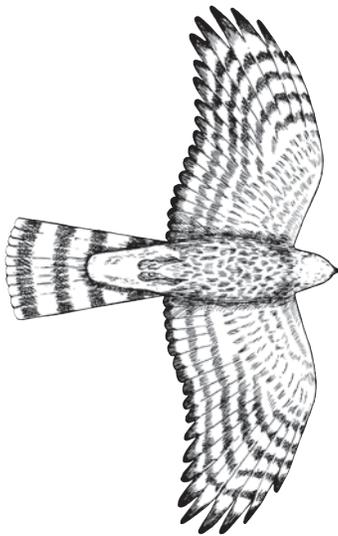
Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*)

Description/Size

Wing span: 20-27 inches

Length: 9-13 inches

Weight: 3-8 ounces



Our smallest accipiter; relatively small headed and small billed. Dark gray above with cinnamon chest and belly barred with white. Crown is slightly darker, throat pale, eyes orange to red. Beak blackish at tip, paler at base; cere is yellow. Short rounded wings are strongly barred below; vent is white. Tail is long, narrow, and square tipped when folded, but often appears slightly rounded when spread. Tail crossed by 3 to 5 visible dark gray bands and narrowly tipped white. Legs and feet are yellow; talons black. Sexes similar in plumage, but males are brighter than females. Females up to 50 percent larger than males. Juveniles are brown above and streaked with brown and white on chest and belly; wings and tails are strongly barred with dark brown. Head heavily streaked grayish brown and white or grayish brown and tawny on crown, nape, and sides of neck, with a pale eyebrow stripe. Eyes pale yellow. No color morphs. Ten subspecies; three in North America. *A.s. velox* is the most widely distributed subspecies. *A.s. perobscurus* is found on the Queen Charlotte Islands off British Columbia. *A.s. suttoni* breeds in southern Arizona.

Similar Species

Cooper's hawk – larger; bulkier head; holds wings straighter; rounded tail with wide white terminal band; streaks on underside appear thinner; flaps wings more slowly.

Merlin and American kestrel – similar size but with sharply pointed wings.

Habitat/Range

Forests throughout North America and on some Caribbean islands – coniferous or deciduous forests and open woodlands from sea level to near alpine. *A.s. velox* - Breeds from Alaska and Canada south to southern U.S.; some western populations only partially migratory or resident, others wintering over much of the breeding range south through Middle America to central Panama, casually to the West Indies and Bermuda. Subspecies breeding south of the U.S. (Mexico, Central America, West Indies, South America) are probably resident or, at least, less migratory. Breeds mainly in large stands of deciduous, coniferous, and mixed pine-hardwood forests and pine plantations. During non breeding season, may be seen in subalpine areas, hedgerows in agricultural areas and backyards near bird feeders.



Food/Diet

Feeds mostly on small birds – sparrows, warblers, finches, swallows, thrushes, blackbirds, quail, flycatchers and vireos. Also feeds on small mammals such as squirrels, mice, small rabbits and bats. Occasionally eats large insects such as grasshoppers, dragonflies, crickets and caterpillars.

Voice

Silent most of the year; less so during the breeding season in dense forest when vocalizations may be the primary means of communication between paired birds. Males give a sharp clearly spaced *kip kip* when arriving in nesting territory sometimes replied to by female with several *keps* or *keeeep*. Alarm call is a long series of sharp *kik kik kik kik*. Begging calls of nestlings and solicitation call of female a high-pitched *ee*. Sometimes utters “weak cackles” during copulation.

Behavior

Typical accipiter flight pattern of an alternating series of 3 to 6 shallow wing-beats, followed by short glides. Wingbeats quick and flicking. Commonly soars, especially in morning. Soars and glides on level wings with slight bend at wrist. When hunting, swift and maneuverable; uses long tail as a rudder to change direction as it tracks prey and avoids vegetation. It is a "sit and wait" predator that perches in a concealed place then dashes out quickly to capture prey. Also flies low, alternating rapid wingbeats and glides, through open forest looking for prey, using brush, trees and manmade structures for concealment. Pursues small birds through dense foliage and will even run after prey on the ground, taking long jumps aided by wing flapping. Grasps prey with needle sharp talons, usually killing the prey on impact. Prey is carried to perch where it is plucked and torn into pieces. Some plucking sites habitually used, especially near nests and on breeding-season foraging ranges. During winter, prey more often plucked on ground. Food-caching is not reported. Highly territorial when breeding. Adults and fledglings respond to intruders at nests by vocalizing, chasing, and attacking. Reaction to human intruders varies among individuals. May quietly leave nest, perch and call, fly about area while calling, or dive to within 3 feet of intruder. Birds in northern extent of the range migrate south as far as Panama; birds at higher elevation move to lower elevation during winter. Usually migrates alone. Soars on migration, but also engages in active flap-sailing flight. Frequently hunts on migration. Although the species makes short water crossings (less than 18 miles), reverse and diverted migration in the face of a water barrier is not uncommon. Lightest wing-loading of all North American diurnal raptors thus is greatly affected by wind; line of flight is often erratic. Compensate for wind drift while on migration by adjusting headings during periods of flapping flight.

Reproduction/Nesting

Clutch size: 3-6 eggs

Eggs: elliptical, pale bluish, large splotches of rich brown, 1.5" x 1.2"

Incubation: 30-34 days

Fledge: 24-27 days

Disperse: 2-4 weeks

This hawk is perhaps the most secretive of North America's forest-breeding raptors, and researchers still have much to learn about basic aspects of its breeding biology. Courtship behavior is not well described. Males establish territories then try to attract females by

soaring in broad circles over treetops with tail closed and undertail coverts flared and giving a repeated nasal call.



Both male and female then mix soaring and rapid flight accompanied by intermittent calling. At irregular intervals, each performs a repeated series of shallow and deep dives, followed by recovery of height. Frequently, either male or female will plunge nearly vertically from a stationary position with closed wings, sometimes recovering just above the canopy. This lasted 3 to 20 minutes and is repeated several times, all ending with a steep dive into the forest. Nests are built in stands of young, dense conifers next to clearings, brushy areas, or open woodlands. May prefer nesting near water. Nests are bulky platforms of small sticks, placed on a horizontal limb next to the trunk in a dense well-developed portion of the crown well below the top of the canopy; usually 16 to 26 feet above the ground. Prey-plucking areas usually are upslope from the base of the nest tree. One brood is raised per year. May be capable of breeding their first year, but most breed in their second year. No information available on the duration of pair bond.

Life Span

Longest recorded – 12 years 2 months.

Conservation Status

Not on the US Fish and Wildlife's Endangered or Threatened Species List. However it is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Idaho Fish & Game lists the sharp-shinned hawk as a protected non game species for which it is illegal to collect, harm or otherwise remove from its natural habitat. Western populations appear stable but eastern populations were in decline during the 1970s primarily due to DDT; a rebound in numbers followed the U.S. ban of DDT. Populations in the east have shown definite upswings in recent years, though several eastern states list this hawk as a species of special concern. Although concentrations vary widely among individuals, organochlorine levels in some hawks remain sufficiently high to affect reproductive success. The species may be vulnerable to pesticide use in Latin America, as many of its prey are neotropical migrants that overwinter there. Causes of mortality include: collisions with vehicles, collisions with windows near bird feeders, and predation by other accipiters. Greatest vulnerability to illegal shooting is during migration. Due to the difficulty in estimating abundance of this hawk at any level (continental, regional, local), it is difficult to determine the effects of forest management practices and habitat degradation due to agricultural and urban development in North America or the Neotropics on population levels.

Viewing in the NCA

Some sharp-shinned hawks winter in the NCA from November through February. They migrate through the NCA from August through October and from February through May.

Interesting Facts

Spanish name:
Gavilán pajaro

- The scientific name comes from the Latin word *accipere* meaning to take or to grasp and refers to a bird of prey, and *striatus* meaning striped referring to the streaked underparts of immatures.
- Common name refers to the lower leg bone which is laterally compressed, hence the name "sharp-shin."
- Other names: chicken hawk, bird hawk, little blue darter.
- The most common hawk seen around songbird feeders.
- Interior of mouth is a light cobalt blue.

Sources

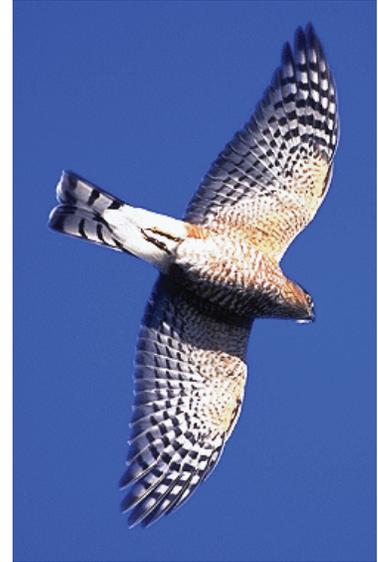
[AXIA CD ROM](#) - Know Your Birds of Prey
[Bird Banding Lab](#) - www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/homepage/long3120.cfm
[Idaho Fish&Game](#) - <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/wildlife/nongame/birds/birdspecies.cfm>
[National Audubon Society](#) - The Sibley Guide to Birds
[The Peregrine Fund](#) - www.peregrinefund.org/Explore_Raptors/hawks/ssnhawk.html
[Birds of North America Online](#) - <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/482>
[US Fish and Wildlife Service](#) - http://ecos.fws.gov/tess_public/pub/listedAnimals.jsp
and www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/regulationspolicies/mbta/mbtintro.html

Illustrations - courtesy of Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Map - The Peregrine Fund

Sharp-shinned Hawk
(Accipiter striatus)



Adult



Immature



Photos: Know Your Birds of Prey, Axia CD ROM