

Urban Bird Talk: Cooper's Hawk

Accipiter coopererii

Gillian Martin



Immature bird pouncing on shrubbery to flush prey. Photo by Peggy Honda

It surprises many people to see a Cooper's hawk on a backyard fence, as birds of prey are generally wary of humans. But this raptor is becoming a common sight in many urban areas throughout the lower 48 states. A crow-size bird, the Cooper's hawk is a risk-taker, particularly when an appealing meal is in view. A perched Cooper's hawk is sufficiently impressive, but when it pursues its prey, its dynamic presence is jaw-dropping.

The bird's short, rounded wings provide immense speed, even at take-off. A long tail provides exceptional maneuverability. This is a determined bird. Many a song-bird or ground squirrel that sought cover within dense shrubbery could tell a tale of sheer terror. A Cooper's hawk will risk injury by thrusting itself against woody

vegetation or through a dense canopy to flush its target. Unlike other raptors, the successful Cooper's hawk kills prey with its feet, not its beak. The victim is repeatedly squeezed within its talons.

Urban areas provide a wealth of prey species for the Cooper's hawk. Unfortunately, urban areas are also full of unfamiliar hazards, including buildings. A frightened urban bird flies erratically, and if the hawk is not diverted, this feather-dressed projectile can fly straight into a building – the leading cause of death in urban Cooper's hawks.

Though its historic habitat is forests and woodlands, the Cooper's is drawn to our communities by large trees which offer cover, and by bird feeders and bird baths which attract the prey it favors. Medium size birds such

as mourning doves, rock pigeons, European starlings, American robins and quail are prime targets. But Cooper's also pursue small mammals including squirrels, bats and mice.

In the west, Cooper's commonly breed from early April to early June. Their stick nests can be found in diverse tree species typically 25-50 feet high in the crotch of a tree or on a branch. About 12-17 inches in diameter is the norm. Adults raise one clutch per season. Eggs may number two-six and are pale blue to bluish white. Hatching is asynchronous, so nestlings vary in maturity and leave the nest two or more days apart. In late fall and winter fewer Cooper's may be observed in California and Arizona because some birds migrate northward or to central and southern Mexico.

Tree care providers can support Cooper's (and all birds) by not pruning foliage around active nests. Doing otherwise exposes vulnerable nestlings to the elements and to predators. In fact, unless imminent risk to people or property exists, it is best to delay work in any tree with an active nest. After fledging, immature Cooper's will return to the nest for about ten days to be fed and to roost. Work may be resumed when the young no longer return to the tree. Large nests are sometimes reused by adult Cooper's; but other species may adopt them as well. It is good practice to leave these nests and surrounding vegetative cover in place when possible.

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Nest with nestlings in tree. *Photo by West Coast Arborists*



Mature bird showing characteristic adult plumage.
Photo by Wikimedia



Immature bird in pursuit of ground squirrel.
Photo by Peggy Honda