

## Sharp-shinned Hawk – Eastern Kingbird Interaction

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There are a number of well known potential causes of death among songbirds, including attacks by hawks. However, when looking at any particular species, there seem to be few, if any, actual observations available to indicate whether any particular mortality factor has occurred and, if so, how frequently.

A particularly interesting relationship exists between Eastern Kingbirds (*Tyrannus tyrannus*) and predatory birds. While kingbirds are known for their aggressive nature, how far can they go with a potential threat to their own life? Very limited information was available to Murphy (1996) on which to base comments about Eastern Kingbird reactions to, or threats from, small bird predators.

He cites an instance of a kingbird being killed by an American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), but while distracted with attacks on a Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*). He indicates that kestrels also may be chased on occasion, although they are usually given a wider berth. Even with the kingbird's flying ability, is it worth the risk to approach another skillful flier? Apparently so, if the motivation is appropriate.

With respect to *Accipiters*, Murphy (1996) can only say that they will be chased by kingbirds if they have been "spotted". While we know that Sharp-shinned Hawks (*A.*

*striatus*) are predators of small birds (Fisher 1893, Snyder 1932, Duncan 1980), few are the opportunities to witness an attack by one of them. Most data on food habits come from stomach content analyses.

While Eastern Kingbirds are within the size range of birds taken by Sharp-shinned Hawks (Storer 1966), I have been unable to find reference to a documented instance of a Sharp-shinned Hawk killing an Eastern Kingbird. An interaction I witnessed last summer, then, seems worth reporting for what it can reveal about kingbirds and Sharp-shinned Hawks.

In early August 1998, shortly after noon, I was cutting grass at my place near Sunderland, Ontario. I was riding a tractor along the south edge of a field, and just as I was turning north at the eastern corner, a Sharp-shinned Hawk flushed from a fencepost, perhaps 25 m ahead. As it flew west across my path, I noted a greyish back, indicating an adult. My impression was that it was a male; however, being distracted by what I was doing, and later seeing, I am not certain of that.

The hawk flew west across the field and perched low on the dead branch of a tree in a fencerow there. A few moments later, it flew north behind the row of trees to try to intercept another bird (which I also flushed) as it passed through or

over tall trees in the same fencerow. The hawk missed, and soared back into the field where I was.

Just prior to the hawk reappearing, two Eastern Kingbirds left the top of another tree, somewhat farther along the same fencerow. They flew slowly across the field toward a large clump of tall shrubs a short distance in front of me, as I continued travelling along the eastern edge of the field. Ever the opportunist, the Sharp-shin went after the trailing kingbird. The kingbird saw it coming in time, and made evasive manoeuvres that narrowly but handily evaded two quick attempts to grab it.

By this time, the other kingbird had become aware of what was happening and, in an instant, had reversed direction and was diving for an attack. In the few seconds more that they were in sight, the hawk was fleeing, with the kingbird closely pursuing and vehemently pounding away at the back of the hawk.

Given the chance then, it seems a Sharp-shinned Hawk would take the opportunity to try to kill an Eastern Kingbird. They are of a size that even a male Sharp-shin is apparently capable of handling (Storer 1966). It seems fairly obvious, however, that this potential predator is not much to be feared by an experienced and aware kingbird, particularly if it is motivated

appropriately. I could not help but be impressed by the speed, agility, and determined response of the kingbirds in this situation. What is not clear is the motivation.

It would be interesting to know if the attacked bird was a juvenile following one of its parents (a distinct possibility). Also, was the hawk able to recognize a juvenile, or did it just try anything opportunity presented? Had the hawk succeeded in striking the one kingbird, would it ever have had a chance to eat it in peace, or would it have ended as another futile pursuit?

### Literature Cited

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