

FIELD NOTES


Five Eagles and a Heron

John Cushing

My 10-year-old son Sam and I went into the Deer Island Park in Amesbury at about noon on February 17, 2004. The sky was overcast with temperatures in the teens and a moderate northwest wind was blowing. We observed several Great Cormorants and Common Mergansers under the swing bridge. We also saw a Great Blue Heron standing on a pier of the bridge. As we watched the mergansers and cormorants diving to catch fish, the heron swooped down and landed on the water. It floated there for a minute or so, stuck its bill into the water, pulled up a small fish, and quickly flew back up onto the pier. I was amazed to see this heron floating in the river like an odd pelican with a skinny blue-gray body and a long narrow bill. It lacked the buoyancy of a pelican, however, because its half-submerged body looked more like one of the cormorants floating near it. I have been bird-watching for more than 45 years, and this was the first time I had ever seen a heron swimming on the water!

We then walked down stream to the eastern tip of Deer Island and spotted two immature Bald Eagles perched in trees across the river. As I tried to help Sam find a perched eagle with the binoculars, we realized that five immature eagles were flapping and soaring in the air above the river. Meanwhile, the Great Blue Heron had landed on the river surface again and caught another fish, in the manner observed earlier. One eagle immediately swooped down to attack the heron as it was lifting off the water with the fish in its beak. The other four eagles immediately joined the chase. The heron soared, and dipped, and circled around as it tried to evade the five eagles that were harassing it. After a few minutes of bobbing and weaving in flight, the heron finally dropped the fish, and two eagles immediately plunged into the water to retrieve it. Neither eagle emerged from the water with the fish. The other eagles lost interest in the heron, and it flew away unmolested.

I have since wondered why the eagles were so quick to chase this heron, yet appeared to ignore the mergansers and cormorants which were also catching fish in the same area. One explanation may be that the mergansers and cormorants could dive to avoid the eagles, while the heron could not. Another consideration could be that the frigid weather disrupted the normal wading and feeding behavior of the heron. Ice floes had accumulated along the river's edge, and the heron simply could not forage for food by wading along the shoreline. Possibly facing starvation, the heron must have adopted the feeding strategy of the mergansers and cormorants. The heron was apparently successful when it fished by floating on the water; it just couldn't swallow the fish in that posture. The first time we saw it catch a fish, it flew right back to the pier to swallow the fish. The second time we saw it catch a fish, it was farther down river and had to hold the fish in its bill until it could return to shore. The eagles were

quick to see the freshly caught fish and seized the opportunity to try to steal a meal from the heron. Although I would normally consider the Great Blue Heron to be slow and deliberate in flight, it was surprising to see how adept it was in avoiding the diving and wheeling flight of the eagles. 

Sharing an Afternoon of Birdbanding with a Sharp-shinned Hawk

William E. Davis, Jr.

Most people who put out food for birds in winter have witnessed a Sharp-shinned Hawk darting into a feeder or shrub looking for an avian meal, scattering birds in every direction. The phenomenon is so common that the feeding of accipiters on concentrations of small birds at bird feeders has been linked to the northward range expansion of Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks in winter (Davis 1992). The association of accipiters with feeding stations has even prompted debates about whether songbirds should be fed in winter, although there is no evidence that predation at feeders affects in any significant way the small passerine populations which are the primary beneficiaries of your winter bird food. Some contend that bird feeding probably does not cause higher predation mortality than would be found in more natural settings and that feeders may even afford a comparatively safe haven from predation, since there are more birds to sound the alarm. Easily accessible feeder food may also serve to reduce foraging time, and hence the risk of predation faced by songbirds (Dunn and Tessaglia 1994).


I have had Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks marauding at my winter feeding stations nearly every winter for the past twenty years. Occasionally they are successful and linger to enjoy their meal — I had a Cooper's Hawk spend five hours devouring a starling (Davis 1996) — but usually these hawks leave as quickly as they come, perhaps “trap-lining” a number of bird feeders in the area. Hence, I was surprised to find myself spending the better part of an afternoon sharing my bird feeders and attendant small birds with an adult Sharp-shinned Hawk.

On Christmas Eve, 1998, I awoke to find several inches of snow on the ground and decided to spend the day banding birds in my backyard as part of a long-term banding study I was conducting. I had seven platform bird-feeding stations surmounted by wire traps that served as bird feeders, except when I was banding birds. As noon approached, I had already banded about seventy-five birds, when I noticed from my kitchen window a flurry of activity at one of the feeders. An adult Sharp-shinned Hawk perched on a feeder platform, wings and tail spread, was attempting to attack a Dark-eyed Junco caught in one of the trap cells. The hawk then flew to a second platform, perched on top of a feeder, and attempted to get at another junco inside. I attempted to scare the hawk away, but to my surprise it simply flew up and perched about fifteen feet up in an apple tree, about thirty feet from the feeders. When I removed the juncos from the traps, the hawk's only response was to fly to a

perch about five feet above its previous one. While I then removed two more juncos from a third trap, the hawk flew down to a fourth feeder less than twenty feet from me which contained two trapped juncos, making a close pass over it and perching on a brush pile five feet from the feeder. When I walked over to retrieve the remaining trapped juncos, the hawk flew back to the apple tree and landed about fifteen feet from the ground and twenty-five feet from the feeder.

By 12:30 p.m., a few juncos and chickadees were again visiting the feeders, and by 12:40, juncos were trapped in feeders at three platforms, and about a dozen juncos fed on the snow below. I banded the juncos and checked on the hawk each time I released a bird; the hawk remained on the same perch. Shortly after 1:00, the hawk disappeared but returned a half hour later, perching on a branch about fifteen feet from the ground and about twenty-five to thirty feet from the feeders. About eighty European Starlings flew in and sat above the hawk in nearby trees, but it paid no obvious attention to them.

In an attempt to scare the hawk away, I walked over until I was directly under it, but it refused to fly. I continued my banding activities, banding and releasing ten juncos in full sight of the hawk perched about eighty feet away, but it made no attacks on any released birds. At 2:30 I removed the last juncos and chickadees from the traps and closed them for the day. At 3:20 the hawk was perched on a dead tree stump about eight feet from one of the traps. It flew over, landed on top of the trap, and then moved to settle on a second trap before returning to perch momentarily on the first. It appeared agitated and flew to several spots before, at about 3:30, it headed toward the sun low in the western sky until it was out of sight.

The aspects of this Sharp-shinned Hawk's behavior that intrigued me were: its apparent lack of fear; its initial attacks on the juncos caught in my feeder/traps, but lack of further attacks on trapped birds or any of the birds that continued to be active around the feeders; and its final agitated trips to the empty feeders before its departure. The brazen, fearless behavior suggests that the bird may have been very hungry, but its subsequent behavior argues against this. Perhaps it fed during the half hour that it was absent. However, the agitated behavior and its inspection of the traps before it left argue against this "full hawk" hypothesis. Whatever the case, it certainly was the first time that I ever shared an afternoon of birdbanding with a Sharp-shinned Hawk. 

References

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