

by Leif J. Robinson, Wellesley

Visual sightings of kills by diurnal raptors are surprisingly few (see, for example, L. Brown, Birds of Prey, 1977:105) thus this observation may be of some interest.

On the morning of December 24, 1979, I was conducting a census of the Weston Town Dump when a flurry of activity, accompanied by loud repeated squawking, about 20 feet up in a large tree bordering Stony Brook, caught my eye. Simultaneously, several starlings flew away to the left, while three or four others, joined by a couple of crows (probably Fish), flew in from the right onto the top of the 60-foot tree; they all stared silently downward. The flurry tumbled to the ground and disappeared behind a small roadside mound.

From my vantage atop a huge pile of leaves, I could hear the squawking continue - high-pitched, inflected, rising "krrees" repeated every second or so. After 5 or 10 seconds the squawking began to fade, and after perhaps 30 seconds more it had become so weak as to be audible only by cupping my hands around my ears.

Then I approached the place from which the sounds had come. Suddenly, a male Cooper's Hawk bolted from the ground and flew silently to a small tree some 20 feet distant. After glowering at me for a few seconds, the hawk moved to another tree only a little farther away where it remained.

On the ground, amid dry leaves and some moss-covered twigs, lay a starling, belly down and head somewhat tilted upward. As seen through my binoculars, though the bird was only a few feet away, the starling's pale yellow gape was opened wide and halved by a pure-white, long pointed tongue that quivered with each pant. Though the plumage of this adult was well ordered, some buttons of blood dotted its salt-sprinkled black coat. After about 30 seconds, I slowly walked away and disappeared behind mounds of trash - feeling well the eyes of the Cooper's Hawk burning holes in the back of my sweater.

After about 20 minutes I returned to the kill. Much to my surprise a male American Kestrel flushed, giving its "kee-kee-kee" call, and landed in the tree first occupied by the Cooper's Hawk. A quick glance revealed that the starling, still belly down, had by now been virtually decapitated. I left the site amid "kee-kee-kee" cheers as the kestrel returned to its meal.

Two points are worth noting. Either the Cooper's Hawk was quite inept or the starling was very tenacious. Second, either the Cooper's Hawk was not particularly hungry or the kestrel was. We shall never know the answers.

The title, incidentally, refers to my starling census of two days previous, made during my fifth annual "antique" Christmas count, as I try to follow the footprints Warren F. Eaton left some 60 years before.

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