

COOPER'S HAWK FEEDING AT A DEER CARCASS

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At 1615 on 18 January 1999 I drove from the north end of Sardis Dam in Panola County, MS toward nearby John Kyle State Park. Shortly after crossing a bridge over the emergency spillway, I saw a large dark object on the grassy roadside about 6 m from the left edge of the road. As I approached the object, I perceived that it was the headless carcass of a white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*). Even more surprising was the realization that a raptor not only was perched on the hindquarter of the carcass, but also was making the head motions of tearing a strip of meat from the exposed haunch. As I slowly passed while viewing the situation, the bird looked at me and then leaped into the air revealing its identity as an adult Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) by its reddish-barred underparts and its notably long, rounded and faintly banded tail.

Immediately after jumping into the air, the hawk alighted again upon the carcass, seemingly reluctant to leave its meal. However, as my vehicle came to a stop, the bird was alarmed enough to interrupt its feeding and to take flight into the nearby (5 m) woodland edge. This observation, while quite brief, seems clearly to have represented opportunistic feeding by a Cooper's Hawk on a large mammal, in contrast to its ordinary dietary habits based on the species' well-known skills in capturing living birds and small mammals.

Feeding on carrion is not a behavior recorded for the Cooper's Hawk prior to the monograph of Rosenfield and Bielfeldt (1993), who described its diet only as "living

animals, typically sub-adult birds and mammals of medium size.” However, a 16 January 1995 observation from northern Pennsylvania involved the use of carrion by an immature Cooper’s Hawk (Schwalbe and Schwalbe 1995). In this instance the object was a three-day-old carcass of a cottontail rabbit (*Sylvilagus sp.*), a species that does comprise a live prey for the accipiter. The bird was very highly resistant to leaving its meal. The Schwalbes’ sighting seemingly was the first published case of Cooper’s Hawk eating carrion. It was so acknowledged by an apparent second-ever reporter of such behavior (Aversa 1997), who described an immature Cooper’s Hawk persistently feeding on the remains of a Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) in Washington in the face of efforts by a Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) to displace it.

Aversa (1997) suggested that harsh weather conditions (temperature ca. 15°C, brisk winds and continuous heavy precipitation) on that day, 27 November 1996, might have driven the raptors to resort to scavenging the numerous debreasted duck carcasses left by hunters that he noted at the observation site.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that opportunistic feeding might occasionally occur when a carcass becomes available, particularly in January with the greater metabolic demands of mid-winter weather, and especially so for immature birds with less-practiced hunting skills.

Acknowledgment

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Literature Cited

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