

Death by drowning — one Cooper's Hawk's approach

photographs and narrative by Roy Gerig

TO THE GROWING LIST of "tool-using" birds, birds which sometimes catch or kill their prey by utilizing some environmental element or object, we might perhaps add the Cooper's Hawk. Or at least, one Cooper's Hawk. This bird used no thorn, as does the Woodpecker Finch of the Galapagos, to pry its prey from tree trunks. Nor does it drop stones to crack bird's eggs, as does the Egyptian Vulture, nor clams on concrete like the Herring Gull. This particular Cooper's Hawk, in an act that would seem more intellectual than instinctive, was observed to hold a Starling under water until it drowned. Roy Gerig relates the event,

which is pictured in the series of photographs shown here.

"On January 9, 1978, near Salem, Oregon, I observed and photographed a Cooper's Hawk killing a Starling by drowning it. I had watched the hawk struggle with the Starling for several minutes with no apparent success in some underbrush. The hawk was aware of my presence and was moving away from me and staying well hidden, but then to my surprise it carried the violently struggling Starling out into the open directly in front of me, no more than 40 feet away, and into a depression where several inches of rainwater had collected.

Once in the water with the Starling, the hawk merely stood on top of it, and when the Starling would struggle to raise its head and a wing out of the water, the hawk would shift its feet so that it would push the Starling's head back under the surface. It inflicted no other violence on the Starling during the time they were in the water. The hawk appeared to be nervous with me standing only about 30 feet away by this time, but made no attempt to leave for about four or five minutes, by which time the Starling had stopped struggling entirely and appeared to be dead. Then the hawk flew easily away, the Starling in its grasp."

Greig notes that "the poor quality of the slides was owing to a very low light level. It was nearly dusk and the photographs were taken at 1/15 sec, with a 400 mm lens, using a monopod."

— 4035 Mahrt Ave., SE
Salem, OR 97301.



In this photograph, the hawk can be seen with the Starling, struggling and partially submerged, in its grasp.