

HAWKS AND THEIR NESTS IN MICHIGAN

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To the average person a hawk is a hawk, or if one wishes to be more specific, one says, "All hawks are thieves, and I shall shoot whenever I am near one." This tendency may be partly explained by the fact that some are destructive, and because of the difficulty in learning to distinguish species they are all classed as harmful. The tendency is further explained by the mania of many hunters to shoot any large or shy bird, and to consider a successful kill as an indication of marksmanship. Not long ago I was in a rookery of blue herons. Floating around in the flooded woods were several of those beautiful birds which had been shot down by some ruthless hunter, and left to decay in the water. Climbing to some of the nests, I found young birds in practically every nest.

Not all hawks possess equally destructive habits, in fact a few are of great economic value to the farmer. There are nine species of hawks found in Michigan under the family name of *Buteonidae*. Three of these, Cooper's, Goshawk, and Sharp-shinned, may be classed as very destructive. The Red-tailed Hawk is one which occasionally gets bad habits. The Marsh, Red-shouldered, Swainson's, and Rough-legged Hawks are decidedly beneficial, or at least economically harmless. One of the ways by which one becomes familiar with the species, is to study their nesting habits. To visit an individual in his home, is to become acquainted.

Hawks are early nest builders. The Red-tailed Hawk is probably the earliest, beginning the nest often during the last half of March. The Red-shouldered, Swainson's, and Broad-winged Hawks nest from April 1st to May 10th. Cooper's Hawk nests from late April to mid-June. The Marsh Hawk nests about the middle of May. The Sharp-shinned Hawk and Goshawk are rarely if ever found nesting in Michigan. The Rough-legged Hawk nests in Labrador.

Let us imagine that we are spending a few hours looking for hawks' nests. Of the hawks named above as nesting in Michigan, only the Marsh Hawk nests on the ground; the others nest in trees at heights varying from twenty to a hundred or more feet. The nests are usually placed in trees located in small patches of woods, although the Red-tailed Hawk sometimes builds its nest in trees standing in the open. We may direct our attention then to the farm woodlots comprising from five to twenty acres.

One fact that simplifies the finding of hawks' nests is that most of them are built before the leaves are started on the trees. One soon



FIG. 20. Nest of the Red-tailed Hawk, in Michigan, seventy-five feet from the ground.



FIG. 21. Nest of the Red-shouldered Hawk, in Michigan, thirty-eight feet from the ground.

discovers though that spring trees contain many large nests. Briefly these nests may be described as follows: There are the large round leafy nests which are the nests of squirrels, built during the fall and winter preceding. Then there are the old and new crows' nests. These more closely resemble possible hawks' nests. Usually old crows' nests can be distinguished by the blackened and dilapidated condition apparent even from the ground. New crows' nests usually show an abundance of dried grass used in construction. If the nest is new, the old bird can usually be flushed from the nest by throwing a stick into nearby branches. Then there are the old and new hawks' nests. Old nests may remain in the trees for several seasons, although they are seldom if ever used again.

One soon learns to recognize a hawk's nest almost at a glance, even from quite a distance. On April 18 while driving a car on the highway nearly half a mile from some woods I located a large nest which I later found to be the nest of a Red-tailed Hawk. At another time while driving by a patch of woods bordering the highway I observed a Broad-winged Hawk sitting on the edge of her nest where she had just alighted. When actually in the woods the bird usually flushes from the nest when the observer is about ten or fifteen rods away.

No matter how "good" a nest may look from the ground I have learned from experience not to climb to any nest unless the bird has been flushed. Nothing is much more disappointing and irritating than when after a hard, dangerous climb expecting to find eggs or young to photograph, one finds only an abandoned bunch of twigs. Occasionally one will climb into an uncompleted nest from which the old bird is frightened away and find nothing, but such experience, occasionally, can not be avoided.

Hawks' nests can not be considered common, in fact they may be considered rare. Woodlot after woodlot will contain no nest at all, and I have never found more than a single nest in a woodlot. To locate a nest then brings a real thrill as the old hawk flies rapidly away.

Some identifications can be made as the hawk leaves the nest. A process of elimination can be used. It will not be a Goshawk, Sharpshinned, or Rough-legged Hawk, as they nest beyond the Northern boundary of Michigan with perhaps a few exceptions. A Marsh Hawk never nests in a tree. Swainson's Hawk is a mere straggler from the West, rarely nesting in Michigan. That leaves identification to four species, Red-tailed, Red-shouldered, Broad-winged, and Cooper's. Ref-



FIG. 22. Nest of the Broad-winged Hawk, in Michigan, fifty feet from the ground.



FIG. 23. The same nest (as above) as seen from above.

erence to dates of nesting will further aid in identification of these four. The Red-tailed Hawk can often be identified as it soars over head. As it turns up with its back to the sun, the upper side of its tail feathers will show up reddish brown, even from quite a distance.

More complete identification can be made by climbing the tree, and examining the nest and eggs, a thing which can be done without disturbing further incubation. Then too there is always the possibility of finding the nest of a species only rarely known to nest in Michigan.

Climbing, however, is dangerous and difficult. Perhaps a few words might be given here in regard to this necessary part of bird study.

Ordinary telephone climbers may be used but the spurs should be long and sharp. Then too there is always the danger that the bark may chip out. A firm hold should be retained by the hands or arms at all times. This warning is probably unnecessary for when one gets up from twenty to one hundred feet, one does hang on.

Three other rules may be given. Never climb a tree unless you see the old bird actually leave the nest. Never climb to show off. Thirdly, in climbing always retain a firm hold with at least one hand at all times. I well remember one occasion when I failed to observe the first two, but followed the third. While resting about forty feet from the ground, standing on an apparently solid limb and holding to a green limb about waist high, the lower limb broke like a flash, but the upper limb held.

Big trees are hard to climb. It is difficult to secure a safe hold on big limbs. It is always well to carry about seventy-five feet of quarter-inch rope. This can be thrown over higher limbs and used to steady and support one in climbing, or else to support part of one's weight in descending. It can be used also to raise or lower the kodak. Extreme caution should be used in climbing wet, slippery trees.

One should climb slowly, accustoming oneself to increasing height. Often when the wind is blowing the tree will sway considerably, especially when one nears the top. Unless one has well developed muscles, and can accustom himself to height and danger, it is best not to attempt to climb. One must take chances in climbing.

Probably the largest of the nests, as well as the most difficult to reach will be that of the Red-tailed Hawk. On April 18th I found a nest of this species in a large red oak. The tree had been struck by lightning leaving a large crease on one side bordered with dead bark. It was about twenty feet to the first limb. The limbs were large and

far apart. The rope had to be used both in ascending and descending. The nest was seventy-five feet from the ground, and out near the end of a limb. It was an enormous bundle of sticks, lined with some leaves and dry strips of bark. There were three eggs in the nest. Identification was made by observing the reddish tail of the bird in flight, and by the size and markings of the eggs. These are the largest of the hawks' eggs and average 2.40x1.82.

The Cooper's Hawk builds somewhat later than the other tree nesting hawks, fresh eggs being found into June. They closely resemble the eggs of the Red-shouldered Hawk except that they are without marks of any kind. This is the true chicken hawk. The eggs average 1.92x1.49.

The nest of the Red-shouldered Hawk is not usually so difficult to reach, usually being built nearer the ground. Often, however, as the picture will show, it is built among large limbs which are difficult to climb around. The eggs are three to four in number, dirty white, and nest-stained, sometimes faintly splashed with brown and lavender. They average 2.13x1.70.

Like the Red-shouldered Hawk, the Broad-winged Hawk is apt to build its nest in more accessible places than the Red-tailed Hawk. On April 10th I found the nest of a Broad-winged containing two eggs; on April 14th, a nest made of leaves and twigs, lined with down from the old bird, dry bark, and cornstalks, containing three eggs; and on May 10th, another with four eggs. The eggs average 1.93x1.57. This is one of our beneficial hawks.

A few words may be said concerning the nest of the Marsh Hawk, the only hawk nesting on the ground. The nest is placed in swales, where water stands in the spring, but which dries up in time for the nest about the middle of May. The eggs are pale blue and unspotted, averaging 1.78x1.41. The hawk is readily recognized as it sails close to the ground over meadows and low-lying ground, by the white upper tail coverts. As it makes such a fine mark for "sportsmen", few can resist the temptation to shoot, although it is one of our most beneficial hawks.

A few days spent in the woods in the early spring and summer ought to enable one to familiarize himself with the different species of hawks. This observational study, supplemented by reference to some good bird book, will add to one's knowledge of hawks, and enhance the enjoyment which the nature lover gets out of field trips, or hikes in the woods.

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