

Sparrowhawk behaviour



We have had a tremendous response to the piece in the last issue about Sparrowhawks drowning prey, so much so that we thought we should run this feature to report your experiences to a wider audience.

Sparrowhawk, by Steve Round

In the last issue of *Bird Table* we featured a note from BTO Garden BirdWatcher Sonia Nicolle, who had witnessed a Sparrowhawk attacking and then drowning a Magpie in her Pembrokeshire garden. Many of you wrote or emailed to tell us about similar observations from your gardens and we wanted to report back on those here.

BACKGROUND: HUNTING METHODS

Most hunting is done on the wing, the Sparrowhawk often using a perch to locate potential prey and then making a rapid and low attack. Sometimes a soaring bird will make a stoop from height, perhaps targeting a flock of Starlings or birds of a similar size. Sparrowhawks may also respond to the alarm calls of other birds.

Small birds are usually killed by the impact of the Sparrowhawk's strike, but larger prey can be more difficult to subdue.

In such cases, the Sparrowhawk will sit on the prey, holding it with its talons. It will then repeatedly push its talons into the body of the unfortunate victim in a squeezing motion. The two longest talons can do significant internal damage when used in this manner and most, but not all victims die before the Sparrowhawk begins to feed. Sparrowhawks will often drag prey into cover before plucking and feeding and it may be an extension of this behaviour that has seen some individuals drag some victims into water. The behaviour is probably not that common, but it seems that some individuals have learnt to exploit the presence of a pond at some sites and for particular types of prey.

YOUR OBSERVATIONS

Several observers reported seeing Sparrowhawks dealing with medium-sized

birds, such as Starling and Blackbird, by dragging them into a garden pond. Pete Clark's note was typical. 'I encountered a male Sparrowhawk on the lawn of my back garden mantling a Starling that was still very much alive and kicking. After about 15-20 minutes of the aggressor trying to reposition its talons to kill this lively Starling, it made its way, 'bucking bronco style,' to the edge of our pond and subsequently took the plunge and dunked the Starling underwater with only the male Sparrowhawk's head, back and wings above the surface. The Starling was submerged for around a minute before the Sparrowhawk left the pond, but it re-entered the pond when it realised the Starling was still alive. Only when it was dead, did the hawk remove the bird and consume it in its entirety on the lawn.' Similar reports included those from Alison Maddock and Janet Fox.

More of the reports referred to larger prey items, often involving a female Sparrowhawk (the larger of the two sexes). Colleen Penny observed one tackling a pigeon in her local park, dragging it to a pond. The hawk held the pigeon under the water and only managed to stay afloat itself because it was on the back of the pigeon. Christine Johnson saw a Woodpigeon dragged into a puddle at the side of a road along which she was driving, though she did not witness the outcome of the encounter. Chris Roberts and Virginia Kelly reported similar experiences from their gardens, this time involving a Feral Pigeon and Woodpigeon respectively. We also received a report of Sparrowhawk drowning a Moorhen in a similar fashion, from David Jackson.

HUNTING ON FOOT AND MAMMAL PREY

There is no doubt that Sparrowhawks are intelligent hunters and will sometimes hunt on foot to take small mammals and other prey items. Russell Pannell, for example, told us about an occasion last December where a Sparrowhawk took a Brown Rat from under the bird table. Russell had previously seen Sparrowhawks taking mice and voles, but this was the first time he had seen one tackle larger mammalian prey. Interestingly, someone living just down the road from Russell, also reported a bird taking a rat from their garden.

There is no real evidence that Sparrowhawks work together when hunting, though it is certainly true that individual Sparrowhawks may sometimes benefit when several happen to be targeting

the same Starling roost on the same evening. Interestingly, however, Mrs Nield rang us to relate how her husband had disturbed a Sparrowhawk that was trying to get at a Collared Dove in a hedge. The Sparrowhawk then returned with its mate and the pair seemingly worked together to get the dove to leave cover.

JUST PLAIN ODD

David Saunders emailed with an observation which suggests that Sparrowhawks do not get it right all the time. Last summer, as David dug over a flower bed, he unearthed an egg-sized stone which he threw onto the lawn for later disposal. It bounced a couple of times and, simultaneously, David felt a rush of air a few inches from his face as a Sparrowhawk swooped from the direction of a nearby hedge and pinned the stone with both talons. It realised its mistake and for a few seconds gazed balefully at David, thinking no doubt 'You rotter', before flying off!

Do keep your observations coming in as there is little in the published literature on this aspect of Sparrowhawk behaviour. ■

With hungry young to feed, the Sparrowhawk has to work hard to catch sufficient prey.

Smaller prey items are carried to a plucking post, but larger items may be dragged into nearby cover and eaten in situ.



Sparrowhawk, by John Harding

