



Blue Tit, by Amy Lewis

Vilified by some but treasured by most, the Sparrowhawk is one of our most widespread and familiar birds of prey.

Changing fortunes

Just a few decades ago the Sparrowhawk was practically extinct across the eastern counties of England. It is thought that persecution by those in the game-rearing industry, who controlled Sparrowhawks and other predators in order to protect their livelihoods, kept numbers well below natural levels.

A less obvious but equally important problem, was caused by the use of organochlorine pesticides in agriculture. Not only did these compounds, which included DDT and Aldrin, persist in the food chain, accumulating and killing off adult Sparrowhawks, they made Sparrowhawk eggshells very thin, increasing the number of breakages and lowering breeding success.

Now that these pesticides have been banned and persecution reduced, the Sparrowhawk population has recovered, recolonising the areas from which it was lost. The species is now seen regularly in urban and suburban parks and gardens. Unfortunately, given that the majority of their prey is small birds, this has brought them into conflict with some garden birdwatchers.



Sparrowhawk, Paul Storry - © www.naturephotographers.co.uk

A predator of small birds

Some observers have suggested that the recovery of the Sparrowhawk population is behind the decline seen in many small bird populations. The current scientific evidence does not support this view.

A number of independent, scientifically rigorous studies have looked for potential interactions between Sparrowhawks and their prey. None of these studies has found any evidence that Sparrowhawk predation has had any long-term effects on the breeding populations of songbirds, either at the national level (e.g. work published by Thomson *et al.* 1998) or at individual sites (e.g. work published by Newton *et al.* 1997).

Several studies looking at Sparrowhawk predation, demonstrate a reduction in the size of the post-breeding peak in tit numbers in the presence of Sparrowhawks, together with a change in the pattern of seasonal mortality. However, the size of the breeding population the following year remains unchanged, suggesting that Sparrowhawk predation is compensatory and that predation is just one of a number of different factors limiting the size of the tit population (other factors include starvation and competition).

It can be distressing to see a Sparrowhawk catch one of your garden birds but remember, it's a natural process, no different to a Song Thrush feeding on a snail, a Blue Tit taking a caterpillar or a Blackbird eating an earthworm.

Identifying Sparrowhawks. . . Do I have a visiting Sparrowhawk?

If you get a bird of prey visiting your garden, it is very likely to be a Sparrowhawk. The two species that it might be mistaken for are Goshawk and Merlin, and these virtually never visit gardens! Don't be fooled by size – male Sparrowhawks are much smaller than the females.

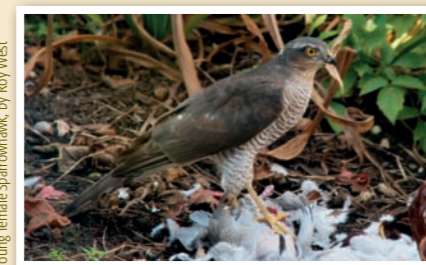
General impressions: Small, broad-winged raptor with a long tail and appearing rather small-headed. The upperparts are dark and underparts finely barred. When perched, you can see it has long, thin yellow legs.

Adult male (right): Smaller than female (wingspan 58-65cm). Slate-grey upperparts and white/off-white underparts with rufous barring, though the pattern varies between individuals. Some are evenly barred while others are almost completely rufous on the cheeks, throat and flanks.



Male Sparrowhawk, E.A. James - © www.naturephotographers.co.uk

Adult female: Larger than the male (wingspan 68-77cm). Brownish-grey upperparts, with off-white underparts with less rufous barring than the male. The white line above the eye is more prominent in females than in males and a white patch is often evident at the back of the crown.



Young female Sparrowhawk, by Roy West

Prey remains

Gruesome as it may sound, it is often possible to tell a Sparrowhawk kill from that of a mammal like a domestic cat or a Fox. Sparrowhawks pluck the prey's breast feathers, sometimes starting in the garden, though usually then taking the prey into cover or to a favoured plucking area elsewhere.

Look at the shafts of the larger feathers. If plucked by a Sparrowhawk, they will have a split along the shaft. If removed by a mammal, the shaft will be incomplete with a broken end where it has been bitten off.

Eye colour: The iris colour changes with age. Sparrowhawks hatch with a brownish-black colour eye which then turns pale lemon-yellow within a couple of months. As the birds age, the iris goes from yellow to orange and, in some adult males, wine red.



Sparrowhawk bathing, by Jill Pakenham



Female Sparrowhawk, by Amy Lewis

The Sparrowhawk is primarily a woodland bird – short, broad wings help its agility in pursuit of prey.

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sparrowhawk leaflet

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Chris Packham
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Bird friendly feeding guide . . . Favouring smaller birds



Greenfinches, by Jill Pakenham

Although Sparrowhawk predation is part of a natural system, some observers wish to reduce the chances of a Sparrowhawk killing small birds. Here are some tips.

Shall I continue to feed small birds even if a Sparrowhawk is present?

Small birds modify their feeding behaviour in the presence of a predator. For example, one study showed that adult tits occupied bird feeders positioned close to cover, forcing younger individuals to feed on more exposed feeders, where the risk of predation was likely to be greater.

This suggests that small birds can weigh up the risks of feeding in a certain location. If you were to cease feeding altogether, then you would deter the Sparrowhawk from visiting your garden but the small birds would also disappear, presumably followed by the Sparrowhawk.

Research supports the continuation of supplying food at garden feeding stations in the presence of predators. This is because provision of a reliable food supply allows small birds to pick and choose when to feed. If this choice is removed and food supplies become unpredictable, they will be forced to feed when they can, increasing the risk of being caught by a predator.

How can I reduce predation?

Sparrowhawks rely on the element of surprise to gain an advantage over their prey. They often follow a regular route into a garden, usually using the cover of a hedge or shed to get close to the feeding birds and catch them unawares.

This means there are two things you can do to increase the odds in the small birds' favour:

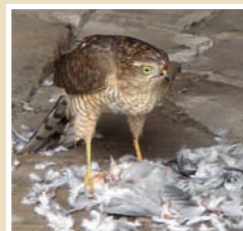
1. Position your feeders and bird table close to cover, ideally thick evergreen bushes, so that small birds have somewhere to hide when a predator approaches.
2. Move the feeding station around the garden on a regular basis. This makes it harder for the Sparrowhawk to predict where it might find its prey. This has the added bonus of reducing the build-up of disease in a given location.

Did you know? – Size is everything

The female Sparrowhawk is, on average, twice as heavy as the male and 25% larger.

Due to their size, females hunt larger birds like Starlings and Woodpigeons, whereas males go for smaller birds like finches and tits.

Being larger allows the female to carry the extra body reserves needed to successfully reproduce. The downside is that she is less agile than the smaller male and finds it more difficult to catch smaller prey.



Female Sparrowhawk, by Graham Mansfield



Male Sparrowhawk, by Jill Pakenham

About the BTO

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) is a Registered Charity (No 216652 – England & Wales, No SC039193 – Scotland) dedicated to monitoring wild birds. We work with birdwatchers and scientists to produce unbiased information that is at the heart of bird conservation. Find out more about us at www.bto.org or write to us at: BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU.

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A BTO Garden BirdWatch Guide

SPARROWHAWKS AND GARDEN BIRDS . . .

