

An Accipiter by Any Other Name

EARLY VALENTINE'S DAY MORNING, my two dogs suddenly were alerted to the back gate, about 35 feet from the house. A large hawk sat on the stucco. The Cooper's Hawk (CH) is one of three Accipiters and has markings nearly identical to the Sharp-shinned Hawk (SSH). But my close-up view made identification much easier. The CH is 16.5 inches long with a wingspan of 28 to 35 inches. (SSH is 11 inches long with a wingspan of 23 inches.) Both of these hawks are resident year round in the Eldorado area.

This CH had a very distinctive dark cap on its head with a pale nape. Back and wings are gray, underparts are a streaked orange-brown. The tail is gray with two or three clear dark bands across it, starting from the outer edge. Juveniles have yellow eyes and adults have red eyes. CHs (along with many other hawks) exhibit reversed sexual size dimorphism (females larger and stronger than males). Some birds winter to Guatemala and Honduras.

Monogamous pairs make courtship flights with J-shaped dives. The male selects the nest site in the

crotch of a conifer or at the trunk of a deciduous tree. The nest consists of sticks, twigs, leaves and down. Four or five eggs (laid every other day) hatch asynchronously in about 34 days. Young are semiatrical (immobile, downy, eyes open, must be fed) and fledge in 27 to 34 days. Young birds thus are different sizes and the smallest may be pushed out of the nest if food is limited. Both parents incubate the eggs and bring food to the nest. The young depend on parents for 30 to 40 days after fledging. Diet consists of some reptiles, small mammals and birds. Adults fly low through woods when hunting.

As we know, hawks have exceptional eyesight to locate prey. Prey is killed using strong feet with sharp talons. Possibly because of flying through branches and undergrowth in pursuit of prey, 23 percent of CHs examined in a study had healed fractures in the bones of the chest.

P.S. Several people emailed to say they have seen Road Runners in January.

—*Pam Henline*

