

Identification Review: Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks

with an emphasis on a challenging wing-on perspective

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SHARP-SHINNED (*Accipiter striatus*) and Cooper's Hawks (*A. cooperii*) are, at times, impossible to distinguish in the field. This conclusion is evident at most hawkwatching sites throughout North America, where the majority of unknown raptors are categorized as "unidentified accipiters."

Female accipiters are larger than males, but even the largest Sharp-shinneds do not overlap in size with the smallest Cooper's Hawks. This is also true in the West, where Cooper's average smaller than those in the East. Identification based on size can be inaccurate and risky in the field, however. The female Sharp-shinned Hawk and male Cooper's Hawk are most similar in flight style as well. Because of this similarity, they are most likely to be confused with each other. The

shape and flight style of male Sharp-shinneds and female Cooper's, however, are much more distinct. The key to flight identification is to focus on plumage, shape, and flight-style characteristics. Certain characteristics help to define the species at each angle from which birds are viewed. A wing-on, or side view at eye-level, is discussed herein.

Plumage

Adult Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks are blue-gray above and whitish with rufous barring below. The barring is fine to heavy, and can appear faint at a distance. However, the

barring always contrasts with the pure white undertail coverts. Both species have a gray-and-brown-banded tail with a white tip. The Cooper's Hawk's tip is usually broader and more obvious (Figures 1 and 2). However, the white tail tip of an adult Sharp-shinned Hawk can be quite prominent (Figure 3). Therefore, caution should be used when separating these species by this trait alone. Adult Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks have dark caps, but the Cooper's is defined by a contrasting paler nape and, sometimes, back. From eye-level and above this trait may be difficult to distinguish.



Figure 1. The blue upperwing and secondaries (outer halves) contrast sharply with the primaries (hands) on this adult male Cooper's Hawk. Note the contrast between the gray cheek and nape and the dark cap (Sandia Mountains, New Mexico, April 1998).

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The fascination that JL has for raptors began shortly after he moved to southern New Jersey to attend college in fall 1984. He has since worked on numerous related projects, but each spring and fall he serves as an official hawk-counter at one or another raptor location. He co-authored (with Jack Griggs) a pocket guide to raptors, *All the Birds of Prey* (1999, HarperCollins), and has consulted on several raptor projects.



Figure 2. This accipiter exhibits the distinct head and upperwing characteristics that identify it as an adult male Cooper's Hawk: gray cheek, blue upperwing, right wing shows contrasting base and hand. Note the broad back and tail and obvious white tail tip as well (Goshute Mountains, Nevada, September 1999).

Except for size, accipiters are usually not considered sexually dimorphic, but plumage differences do occur between adults. These traits often prove especially helpful in telling female Sharp-shinned from male Cooper's (Figure 4 and Figures 2 and 9). Male Cooper's have pale blue upperwings that contrast with darker primaries (sometimes referred to as "hands") (Figure 1), especially in a glide when the secondaries are partially overlapped, exposing only the blue outer halves (Figure 2 and 9). From the underside, the secondary patch of an adult male accipiter often appears pale or silvery. Some females have bluish backs, but the upperwing is a uniform slate-color. Some adult female Cooper's Hawks are very brown on the upperside (Figure 16), and they can be mistaken for juveniles. Adult female Cooper's and both sexes of the adult Sharp-shinned Hawk usually possess rufous cheeks (Figures 3, 4, 5, and 16). Adult male Cooper's have gray cheeks

(Figures 1 and 2), but first-year adults can have rufous cheeks.

Juvenile accipiters are brown above and buff below, with vertical, dark streaking. Streaking is usually bolder and more condensed on Sharp-shinned Hawks than on Cooper's. However,

there is significant variation within both species (Figures 6, 7, 14, and 15, and Figures 10 and 11). The streaking is usually rufous on Sharp-shinned Hawks as opposed to dark-brownish on Cooper's Hawks. Some Sharp-shinned juveniles can be lightly streaked in brown (Figure 15), and some heavily marked Sharp-shinned can look adult-like (Figure 14). Most Cooper's Hawks exhibit a tawny hood that contrasts with a chocolate-brown back (Figure 11). Be careful, however, because some Sharp-shinned show this trait as well (Figure 8). Other plumage characteristics can help to separate these two species, but they are obscure in the field. Individuals of one species can exhibit markings associated with the other, making identification based on plumage difficult.



Figure 3. Adult female Sharp-shinned Hawks, such as this bird, show a uniform upperside. Note the dark nape, rufous cheek, small head, narrow, straight-cut tail, and bulging secondaries, suggesting stocky wings. In this individual, however, a white tail-tip is fairly prominent (Goshute Mountains, Nevada, September 1998).

Sharp-shinned Hawks



Figure 4. An Adult female Sharp-shinned Hawk, such as this bird, shows a uniform upperside. Notice the dark nape and rufous cheek. Also note the small head, narrow, straight-cut tail, and slightly longer primary projection than that on the Cooper's Hawk. (Hawk Mountain, Pennsylvania, November 1997).

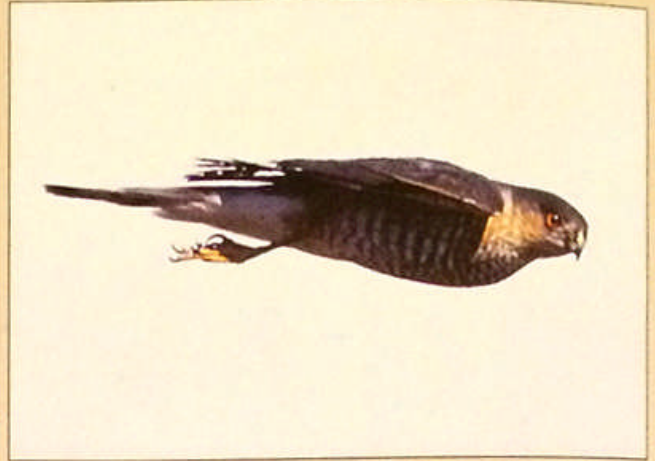


Figure 5. Sharp-shinned Hawks are "chesty" and small-headed, wing-on. Adults, such as this, lack the contrasting pale nape of the adult male Cooper's Hawk. Note the short, narrow tail as well (Goshute Mountains, Nevada, October 1999).



Figure 6. A juvenile Sharp-shinned Hawk here exhibits its characteristic stocky wings and body, narrow tail, small head. This individual is moderately streaked (Goshute Mountains, Nevada, October 1999).



Figure 7. Although the shape and plumage of this juvenile Sharp-shinned Hawk are fitting, the tail is somewhat broad with a slightly rounded, white tip. The underparts are heavily streaked (Goshute Mountains, Nevada, September 1999).



Figure 8. Note the rounded wings, small head, narrow back, short body, tawny hood, and narrow straight-cut tail of this juvenile Sharp-shinned Hawk. Sharp-shinneds, like this bird, occasionally exhibit tawny heads (Goshute Mountains, Nevada, September 1999).

Cooper's Hawks



Figure 9. Similar to the bird in Figure 2, this adult male Cooper's Hawk exhibits characteristic field marks: gray cheek and nape, dark cap, contrasting upperwing, wide back, long, broad, bowed, rounded tail, white tail-tip (Goshute Mountains, Nevada, September 1998).



Figure 10. This juvenile Cooper's Hawk shows a distinct large, broad, tawny head, light streaking, long wings, long, rounded tail, and a lengthy appearance overall (Goshute Mountains, Nevada, September 1999)



Figure 11. From this angle, Cooper's Hawks appear large-headed and long-tailed. Note the bowed tail shape and tawny head of this juvenile. This individual has slightly more streaking than the juvenile shown in Figure 10 (Goshute Mountains, Nevada, October 1998).



Figure 12. The long hands, straight trailing edge to the wing, and large head give this juvenile Cooper's Hawk a triangular appearance. Note the broad back and broad rounded tail (white tip) of this bird (Goshute Mountains, Nevada, October 1999).



Figure 13. It is more common to observe accipiters in the western U.S., such as this adult Cooper's Hawk, actively molting during fall migration than in the east (note the presence of adult and juvenile body, flight, and tail feathers). This bird's square-tipped tail is due to molt (Goshute Mountains, Nevada, September 1999).

identification review



Figure 14. Here is a heavily marked (rufous) juvenile Sharp-shinned Hawk. Individuals such as this may appear very adult-like from the underside in the field (Braddock Bay, New York, April 1994).

Shape

From a wing-on, or side-angle, view, the wings of a Sharp-shinned Hawk are short, broad, and somewhat squared off. The secondaries bulge slightly more than those of a Cooper's Hawk's and slightly less than those of a Northern Goshawk. The head is small and rounded, and shaped somewhat like the head of a turtle. In most cases, the head projects slightly past the leading edge of the wing. Cooper's Hawks have thick necks and larger heads that appear more triangular or buteo-shaped than a Sharp-shinned's (Figure 12). The body of a Sharp-shinned is short and chesty, and the back is narrow (Figure 5). The tail is narrow and relatively short for an accipiter. Males have sharply-cornered, square-cut tails, looking as if they were snipped with scissors. Females have longer tails, either squared or rounded when folded. With longer wings and a larger head, the silhouette of a Cooper's

Hawk is more triangular than the Sharp-shinned's, especially males, which have more tapered wings than females. Cooper's have longer bodies and broader backs than Sharp-shinned Hawks and lack the chesty look. Cooper's Hawks possess longer, broader tails that slightly bow across their width. The tail of a Cooper's Hawk is always rounded, except when molting or when the central tail feathers are worn (especially in spring). A Sharp-shinned Hawk's tail lies flat, as if pressed with an iron. Adults of all accipiters have slightly shorter tail feathers and secondaries than juveniles. The adult secondaries are straight-cut as opposed to rounded on juveniles. As a result of this feature, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's can appear very falcon-like in a glide, especially the males. The silhouette of an adult male Sharp-shinned in a glide can look similar to that of an American Kestrel.

Flight style

Male Sharp-shinned and female Cooper's Hawks are usually very distinct. The female Sharp-shinned and male Cooper's Hawks are most similar in flight style. However, there are flight characteristics common to each species as a whole.

Sharp-shinned Hawks are more buoyant than Cooper's Hawks. They rise quickly, especially on a strong updraft or thermal. Sharp-shinned Hawks also are unstable in moderate to high winds, making constant minor wing and tail adjustments as they bounce up and down on a current of wind. These movements are quick and hyper, as if they've had too much caffeine. Cooper's fly in a direct, steady manner. The Sharp-shinned Hawk's wing-beats are quick, snappy, and lack power. Cooper's Hawks may exhibit quick wing-beats, but the manner in which they flap is stiffer and more powerful. To me, the flight style and wing-beat of a Sharp-shinned Hawk are similar to those of an American Kestrel; a Cooper's Hawk, more similar to the Peregrine Falcon. Sharp-shinned Hawks have difficulty maintaining controlled flight in very high winds along a ridge. To avoid this, they often tuck their wings in completely as they dart past at high speed. Cooper's Hawks do not employ this tactic.

Pitfalls

Be careful when aging accipiters from a wing-on perspective in low lighting. The wings may



Figure 15. Plumage is highly variable within juvenile accipiters. This juvenile Sharp-shinned Hawk is notably pale and lightly streaked (brown), appearing somewhat like a Cooper's Hawk (Goshute Mountains, Nevada, September 1998).

shadow the body, leaving only the undertail coverts illuminated. In this case, even juvenile birds will show a contrast between the body and the undertail. Juveniles can appear adult-like in other cases as well. Heavily marked juveniles can appear barred like adults (Figure 14), and the underside can look rufous from the golden light at dawn and dusk. Some Sharp-shinneds can look quite big-headed at certain

angles, especially birds with a full crop as the head is pushed forward slightly. Be careful: Sharp-shinneds are small headed, but the head almost always projects somewhat past the leading edge of the wing. Due to feather wear, especially in spring or during active molt, a Cooper's Hawk may exhibit a squared-off tail (Figure 13). This is common during the fall migration period in the West, where adult Sharp-



Figure 16. Most adult female Cooper's Hawks exhibit a slate-colored upperside but brownish individuals occur (such as this bird), appearing like juveniles from above (Braddock Bay, New York, April 1994).

shinned Hawks and Cooper's Hawks are often observed in molt. Eastern birds usually finish or halt tail- and wing-molt before heading south in fall. In spring, birds that are extremely worn may appear paler than usual. In poor light, blue looks black, so even pale adults can look black-backed. In light winds, Sharp-shinned Hawks may appear steady or flap slowly.

Remember, it takes time and experience to judge the reliability and variability of most character traits associated with each of these accipiters.



Suggested Resources

You can pick up some good plumage and behavioral tips to accipiter ID from your standard field guide. However, for more in-depth information, you ought to try a number of other sources. You can start with the following books (presented chronologically):

- A Field Guide to Hawks—North America*. 1987. William S. Clark and Brian K. Wheeler. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- Hawks in Flight: A Guide to Identification of Migrant Raptors*. 1988. Pete Dunne, David A. Sibley, and Clay Sutton. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. This book will be published shortly in its second edition.
- A Photographic Guide to North American Raptors*. 1995. Brian K. Wheeler and William S. Clark. Academic Press, San Diego.
- The Wind Misters: The Lives of North American Birds of Prey*. 1995. Pete Dunne. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- How to Spot Hawks and Eagles*. 1996. Clay Sutton and Patricia Taylor Sutton. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- Raptors: The Birds of Prey*. 1996. Scott Weidensaul. Lyons & Burford, New York.