

Presumed Defense of Hunting Territory by a Cooper's Hawk

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LONG AGO, ALEXANDER BENT COMPARED the Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) to its relative, the Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), describing it as a "larger edition of feathered ferocity" (Bent 1937). Anecdotal records in Bent indicate that this species can be extremely aggressive when defending its nest. Indeed, research has established that adult Cooper's Hawks, chiefly males, "direct threat postures, alarm calls, attacks, or chases at potential predators near [the] nest" (Rosenfield and Bielefeldt 1993). However, there does not seem to be any documented evidence of Cooper's Hawks defending a hunting territory.

At 1515 h on 3 February 2009, I was birding along the Ganatchio Trail in east Windsor. It was cold, windy, and mostly overcast, with patches of clear sky to the west. I had just reached the northern end of the trail, where the path is bordered on both sides by residential housing and a small woodlot is present.

Suddenly, I saw a beautiful adult female Cooper's Hawk launch out from a treetop in the woodlot just ahead of me. I quickly raised my binoculars to enjoy the bird and see what she would do. Her bright red eyes were focused intently on a target some distance away, and her flight was powerful and direct at a height of ten to twelve metres. I was very curious to observe what would happen next.

To my surprise, the Cooper's Hawk attacked an adult Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) that was perched high in a tree about one hundred metres away. As the hawk approached, the falcon flew from the tree just as the accipiter lunged at it with its talons. The falcon continued to fly off leisurely to the northwest, and the Cooper's Hawk made no attempt to pursue it.

My immediate impression was that this was an instance of territorial defense. While Cooper's Hawks do occasionally attack larger birds, it was difficult to

believe that this accipiter could successfully surprise and kill a large, alert falcon perched so openly. Moreover, the upper limit of a prey item for a female is 22% of the bird's own mass (Rosenfield and Bielefeldt 1993), and an average Peregrine Falcon outweighs a female Cooper's Hawk by more than 50% (Sibley 2000). There were plenty of more typical prey items in the area, such as European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*), Rock Pigeons (*Columba livia*), Mourning Doves (*Zenaida macroura*), Dark-eyed Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*), and Northern Cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis*). I surmised that the hawk was not happy to have this possible competitor loafing so near "her" hunting ground. Her failure to give chase

seemed to confirm that she only wished to drive the falcon away.

I had never seen or heard of any interaction between these raptors, so I was eager to read the species account for Cooper's Hawk in *The Birds of North America*. However, the authors make no mention of these accipiters attacking falcons under any circumstances. They say nothing concerning defense of hunting territories, and my attempts to find information from other sources have not been successful. Indeed, even the extremely aggressive Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) is not known to attack birds of this size, except in defense of the nest (Squires and Reynolds 1997).

Peregrine Falcons are not known to prey on Cooper's Hawks, so it is doubtful that this female accipiter was concerned for her safety and sought to drive it away for that reason. Since it is equally doubtful that the hawk hoped to make the peregrine its next meal, the incident I witnessed raises interesting questions as to what the behavior signified.

Incidentally, an immature, resident Sharp-shinned Hawk, a probable male, was also perched close by, much nearer to the tree where the Cooper's Hawk had been. It appeared conspicuous to me. Had the Cooper's Hawk failed to notice it? That seems unlikely. Was it simply tolerant of its younger and smaller relative for some unknown reason? That is possible. But perhaps the Cooper's Hawk, aware of the falcon's larger size, considered it more of a competitor for food than



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the almost diminutive Sharp-shinned, Hawk which would feed on much smaller birds anyway. While Peregrine Falcons hunt in the open and not in woodland habitats, Cooper's Hawks sometimes hunt by soaring over fields, which are prevalent at this site. The falcon I saw may have been regarded as a legitimate competitor.

Summary

This note documents what seems best interpreted as an instance of a Cooper's Hawk defending a winter hunting territory. The apparent lack of recorded observations to support this conclusion shows that further study of Cooper's Hawk behaviour is warranted, especially in the context of aggression.

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