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A PET SPARROW HAWK

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

BY WRIGHT M. PIERCE

When one day last spring we discovered in our back yard a young male Sparrow Hawk (*Falco sparverius*), hardly able to fly, little did we realize how wonderful a pet we had acquired. This bird had been hatched in a nest that was in a high palm across the street, but now that he had fluttered out, even though his parents were quite near and must have heard the plaintive calls of their offspring, they paid no attention to the little fellow. He was full of life, and when I took hold of him, he scratched and bit and tried to escape.

Rather than keep the little hawk in a cage, we decided to put a string on each of his legs, these in turn attached to a longer cord, so that when the bird was tied outside he would be able to exercise without harming himself. We found this method satisfactory, especially with this Sparrow Hawk, for even when he gets tangled, if he does not



Fig. 40. A pet Sparrow Hawk "just looking."

free himself, he remains quiet and patiently awaits our coming to rescue him. He has become so adept on the string that he will turn in the air and climb back up the leash to a perch.

A pet Prairie Falcon that we had at the same time would cackle and become nervous and angry when he was tangled. The larger falcon seemed to blame us for his troubles and would scratch and bite viciously when we attempted to untangle him. Our Sparrow Hawk showed no fear of the larger bird, and the falcon did not appear to be interested in the smaller bird; however, we thought it best to keep them apart. If anything came around that frightened or bothered the Sparrow Hawk, he would always cackle angrily and the feathers on the back of his neck would stand up menacingly.

Since his rather inauspicious start, when he was so wild and fierce, our Sparrow Hawk has become very tame and so gentle that we all love him for his little mannerisms. At first we had to force food into his beak, but it was only a short time until he was well able to feed himself. Now he is tied outside most of the time. Here he watches everything that comes near, especially the birds, and even though the jays scold him from a distance of a few feet, he seems not to be afraid, but just keeps his eyes on them and is only mildly interested. One day a pet jay was brought into the room with him. When placed near each other, the jay directed several vicious jabs at the hawk who in turn simply made an apparently rather feeble pass at his tormentor with his beak. This pass was not so gentle as it appeared, for it removed a surprisingly large number of feathers from the jay's back. The jay speedily departed and did not attempt to return.

The sight of the Sparrow Hawk is extremely keen. One day I noticed our bird, his head turned sidewise, intently staring into the sky. Close search on my part located a lazily soaring hawk, but so high that I could just distinguish it. He notices small insects at surprising distances if they are moving, but if they remain still, he often appears not to see them, even if they are quite near. During the first six months that we had our hawk he was offered water, both for drinking and bathing, but he would have nothing to do with it. The pet Prairie Falcon liked to bathe and we could not understand why the Sparrow Hawk acted this way, especially since we had known of other captive Sparrow Hawks that bathed regularly. On hot days, if he was in the sun, the bird opened his beak, panted, and seemed very uncomfortable. I showered him with the hose several times, wetting him thoroughly, but he did not appreciate this at all. He then merely sat and shivered and let his feathers dry without attempting to hurry the operation by flapping his wings, as did the falcon.

When it rained, the bird was very much upset and would not calm down. Even when brought inside, he kept flapping his wings and trying to escape. However, after our bird was about six months old, he began to drink a small amount of water at rather infrequent intervals. He wanted to bathe, but seemed not to know how. Even now, when he is nearly a year old, he presents a comical picture as he sits in a pan of water, tipping up and down and plunging his head into the water. He always seems to want a bath at the most inappropriate times, either late in the evening or on cold cloudy mornings. He only gets partially wet and then sits on his perch, waiting for his feathers to dry, never hastening the drying by flapping his wings or fluffing his feathers as birds usually do. At these times he presents a truly disconsolate picture.

For food our hawk especially likes small chunks of raw beef. If he is very hungry, he cries piteously until we feed him. While eating he stands on the meat, holding it firmly with his talons as he pulls it apart with his sharp hooked beak (fig. 41). We still think that he enjoys his food best when it is fed to him in small bits by hand as



Fig. 41. Sparrow Hawk eating meat.



Fig. 42. Sparrow Hawk disturbed at its meal.

he sits on the back of his favorite chair in the kitchen. However, if hungry, he will eat heartily when away from home, in strange surroundings. When especially starved, he grabs the food with his talons, pulls it underneath him, fluffs out his feathers and spreads his wings until he appears to be about twice normal size (fig. 42). Then if he is bothered, he cackles, weaves from side to side, tries to bite his tormentors, or perhaps turns his back toward them with his head held low, all the while keeping his meat hidden. Or he may attempt to escape by flying with the food held either in his talons or beak. If there is a corner handy he makes for this, and sits there with his head down and feathers and wings outspread, completely covering and hiding his food. This is probably a habit carried over from his nest days, when he did this to keep his food from his hungry nest mates.

Beside raw beef, water insects, beetles, angle worms, daddy-long-legs, flies, moths, spiders, grasshoppers, mosquitoes, mice, and lizards are relished. When feeding, he usually grabs his prey with his talons and then either pulls it into small pieces or swallows it whole as fancy dictates, or perhaps depending upon how hungry he is or how much he is being bothered at the time. For instance, one day I gave him a small lizard; this he carefully pulled apart and swallowed bit by bit. Then I presented him with another lizard fully three inches long, and in one big gulp he swallowed this entire animal, head foremost. This fast swallowing act probably was performed because I attempted to take the food away from him. However, this lizard did not stay down long, for it was coughed up in a minute or so. He seems able, without much effort, to disgorge at any time he wishes.

Like my Prairie Falcon, the little hawk will have nothing to do with frogs, even though he may be hungry. He was only mildly interested in a small water snake that I put near him, although the reptile showed extreme fear, thrashing about and striking at the bird and then crawling in great haste away as soon as possible. Seemingly the bird did not recognize the snake as food, but the reptile certainly realized its danger. Perhaps the results would have been different had the bird been hungry.

Our hawk does not seem to be particularly interested in birds for food, although he will eat English Sparrows and jays if I pull away the feathers, exposing the meat. If the bird is given more to eat than he wants, he carefully pokes the remainder under anything that may be handy, uttering low satisfied "quirks." He always seems quite proud of his ability to do this. After being outdoors all day he is always brought back to his perch in the house, whereupon he goes directly to his hidden food if he is hungry. This action of his would lead one to suspect that in the wild state these birds cache away any excess food they may have. I found several regurgitated pellets, about one-half inch in diameter. These are to be expected, because the hawk swallows many feathers from the birds and considerable hair from the mice that he eats.

It is interesting to note the reactions of this Sparrow Hawk to our small dog. When both are tied in the backyard near together, it appears that each enjoys the company of the other. Certain it is the bird has no fear of the dog. If the dog becomes too familiar, the hawk cackles and then viciously bites the dog's ear or nose, sometimes holding on for several seconds. Then at the first opportunity the bird flies to a higher perch. So far, the bird has never used his talons for defense against the dog.

At night the dog sleeps in a low open box in the house. Once I put the bird on the floor near the box, and the puppy raised up and saw the bird possibly a foot away. Meanwhile the hawk had flattened himself out, with wings outspread, and was intently staring at the dog, all the time weaving from side to side much as a Barn Owl would do if disturbed in the day time. Tiring of these play stunts, the bird straightened up, cackled and then deliberately flew and lit on the dog's head, where he stood for a short

time and then flew to a higher perch. The dog has a habit of putting his paws rather roughly on the bird, who always cackles angrily at this and then flies to a place out of reach. But when a strange dog or a wandering cat comes into the yard, the hawk at once tells about it with shrill, loud, angry cackles. One day a stray cat came too near and we heard our bird cackling angrily. Going to him, we found him much excited, with his talons full of fur and the cat watching him from a distance. The hawk apparently fears nothing, and would probably have met with disaster had we not been near.

A vacation at our mountain cabin did not seem to bother the bird at all. Every night we put him on a stick of wood on the table in the living room. Here he sat intently watching our every action, turning his head from side to side, or fluffing up his feathers and preening each in turn with his beak. Then perhaps he would yawn, fluff up his feathers, stand on one leg, pull his head down on his shoulders until it was nearly hidden, close his eyes, and nap for ten or fifteen minutes. After that he would wake up, yawn a time or two, stretch himself in a satisfied way, and fly down onto the table to jump about, here and there, with gay abandon. This coming to the table was always a signal that he was ready for his play time, which lasted for a half hour or more. If a moth or other insect chanced to fall on the table, the hawk quickly jumped toward it and with startling speed grabbed the prey in his talons. It was almost unbelievable how tiny an insect he could hold in his talons, for many times he caught mosquitoes and tiny flies and held them until ready to eat them. As long as we remained, the hawk was perfectly content to stay there too, but he became nervous the moment we left and would seek a higher perch.

At our mountain cabin he had his sleeping quarters in a box in our bedroom. He never disturbed us after he was put to bed, but if we happened not to arise at the regular time, we would often hear him walking about; he rightly thought that it was time for breakfast. In true sleeping position he stands on one foot, with the other drawn up under his feathers, and pulls in his head until it is completely hidden in his fluffed feathers. I have only found him in this position once or twice, and then always at night; for when he dozes in the daytime he merely pulls his head low on his neck and closes both eyes, with no attempt at covering his head.

He seems to prefer one good meal a day, or perhaps one ounce of meat in the morning and another good feed just before dark; but he is appreciative of small helpings from time to time during the day and even after dark. When through feeding, he carefully and vigorously cleans his bill on his perch. He never seems to eat more than is good for him, although if perchance he should swallow something that he does not relish, which he seldom does, he immediately disgorges it.

We wonder whether he can see after dark; for one night he escaped and appeared to have no difficulty in finding a perch in a pine, where with a flashlight I easily found and caught him. Then again one night I gave him a piece of a mouse and put him in his box, where it was absolutely dark; about an hour later the food was gone. Whether he located this by touch, sight, or smell, I had no way of determining.

The bird plays furiously with pieces of rolled up paper, tearing them into small bits; and sometimes he is interested in grabbing and biting pencils, cards, bits of wood, and other small objects. He is greatly interested in cotton batting and tears it into small shreds. He jumps up and down with great gusto, striking at things that attract him on the table, then stops and at times gazes intently at some insect that we can not see on the wall or ceiling, or he deliberately shuffles along on his legs across the oilcloth top of the table in a very comical fashion. At times he even flies to the floor and for several seconds shuffles in this fashion.

Our bird bites us rarely, and then rather gently, apparently in play, unless we are



Fig. 43. Sparrow Hawk ready to play.

rough with him. If he is hungry he often comes and picks our hands or arms until we feed him, but he bites and scratches viciously whenever we have to place new strings on his legs. He works continually on the knots and on the string itself. At times he has managed to untie one of the knots, but now we have covered them with adhesive tape which he pulls at without success.

The Sparrow Hawk enjoys a looking glass, billing his image and striking at his reflection with his claws or beak. He carefully peeks around the edge of the mirror trying to see his supposed companion. He tolerates the moving picture camera, but never acts naturally before it; he seems to have a great fear of the continuous buzzing noise, and stands it only for a moment or two before flying excitedly away. Strange as it may seem, he does not appear to mind the graflex with its large eye staring at him and its more noisy shutter. Thus my moving pictures of this interesting bird have been rather disappointing. Since he always performs better at night, nearly all my pictures have been taken by artificial light.

I believe that our pet likes our company, and while he does not appear to be afraid of strange people, he never acts the same when I have him away from home. Sometimes when we are using the table as a writing desk, the bird will come over to us and playfully grab the pen or pencil that we are using. After he could fly well we allowed him to sleep on the front, enclosed porch. This was all very fine, except that the bedroom window had to be kept closed, otherwise the little fellow insisted on coming in and visiting my elder daughter, who slept in that room, and worse yet he always appeared at the break of day. Often he comes and rather gently bites our fingers or arms, or plays with our hair if we put our heads down to him. But if he becomes excited or angry, he stands up very straight and the feathers on the back of his head and neck stand up menacingly. He is apt at these times to express his disapproval in noisy sparrow-hawk language.

There remains to relate perhaps the most remarkable incident that so far has

occurred in connection with our pet. One morning he escaped, carrying his leash with him. Some very thoughtless people easily caught him, cut off the strings and set him free before we arrived. We were all much upset, for we supposed that our bird was gone forever. But at the end of two days he was seen near the place where he had been released. My daughter rushed across the street toward him, and when she was about one hundred yards from the bird, he flew cackling toward her with such speed and suddenness that he startled her and she threw up her arms. The hawk flew back to his former perch on the cabin. Then my wife went out with some meat and at once the bird flew to her and started eating. He seemed very happy and satisfied to be back home. Certainly he was a very hungry bird, for apparently he had not eaten while away. Now this suggests to me that while the hunting and feeding instincts are probably present in all birds, our bird was not able actually to catch his own food, because at the age when he left the nest his parents had not yet taught him how to hunt.

Of all the family, the hawk seems to like my small son the best, being very gentle with him, uttering satisfied little notes when he comes near, and never attempting to bite or strike him. He enjoys playing with the rest of us, though he is rather rough at times, especially if we are not gentle with him. On such occasions he will strike, bite, and scream angrily, even though I really believe he likes it. He is not too gentle in his play with my wife, although he seems to like her and always goes to her more readily than to any of the rest of us. One day he escaped again, and this time flew into a large pine. All manner of coaxing by the rest of us failed to bring him down, until my wife went out and stood under the tree and called to him. At once he flew down from his perch, fully thirty feet up, and lit on her hand even though he was not hungry.

Our Sparrow Hawk has been and still is a most wonderful pet; he seems very contented, is active and healthy; and as long as he continues to thrive we shall keep him. Every day we seem to learn more about the traits and moods of this most interesting little falcon.

Claremont, California, April 1, 1937.

BEHAVIOR OF THE PINE SISKIN

WITH ONE ILLUSTRATION

By THOMAS L. RODGERS

Records of Pine Siskins (*Spinus pinus*) for the University of California campus at Berkeley, and for Strawberry Canyon, adjoining the campus, throughout the fall and early winter involve only scattered individuals. The birds are seldom heard, and when seen they are always on the move. Late in winter or early spring, however, they begin to flock, and from then on they are commonly seen foraging, or engaged in courting maneuvers prior to nesting, which begins around the middle of March.

In January, 1936, as through the rest of the winter, I made frequent trips into Strawberry Canyon, and on February 1, I saw my first flock of siskins. This flock of about seventy-five birds appeared "out of thin air" and alighted in a compact group, filling just the top six or eight feet of a leafless alder. Immediately the birds started foraging down through the tree, apparently working on the cones. They did not utter a note as they foraged, but occasionally, as if they had been frightened, there would be a high pitched *psee* and the flock would leave the tree, fly out in a loop of about