

# Cooper's Hawk: Easily misidentified, yet distinctive

BY BRUCE MCCAMMON

About this time of year, we start seeing a variety of hawks and other raptors in north central Washington.

Among them is the Cooper's Hawk.

If you feed birds at your house there is a chance that you've witnessed the attack of a hawk on unsuspecting smaller birds.

It can be a disturbing thing to watch once the chase is complete and the hawk begins its meal.

I need to remind myself that this is nature and that the process goes on with or without my backyard bird feeding.

Identifying a Cooper's Hawk can be challenging.

Trust me, making a firm identification is hard for even the best birders at times. The very similar Sharp-shinned Hawk always seems to confound me at first glance.



*Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.*



**Cooper's Hawk: An eye out for prey.**

If you follow any bird forums or social media sites dedicated to bird identification, you will certainly have encountered the question: "Cooper's or Sharp-shinned?" The two species both have banded tails and similar body form and color.

Two common criteria for identification of a Cooper's Hawk are size and the color on the top of the head and neck of the bird. An adult female Cooper's Hawk is about the size of a football, much larger than an adult female Sharp-shinned Hawk.

A Cooper's Hawk adult will show a dark cap on the top of its head. The Sharp-shinned Hawk will show a dark color on top of the head that extends down the nape of the neck to the back of the bird.

The Cooper's head also tends to be a bit "blocky" while the Sharp-shinned head is rounded and smooth.

.....  
**The challenge of being able to make a proper identification should not hinder your appreciation of these distinguished birds.**

We are lucky to live in an age when there is an abundance of credible information about birds available at the click of a mouse. I resort to a few websites whenever I have trouble identifying a bird.

This link takes you to an Audubon page that will guide you through the challenges of separating a Cooper's Hawk from a Sharp-shinned Hawk: <https://www.audubon.org/news/>

a-beginners-guide-iding-coopers-and-sharp-shinned-hawks.

Please remember, making the distinction in nature can be very challenging.

Hopefully, you will have many opportunities to see either species and observe the field marks that tell one species from the other.

The challenge of being able to make a proper identification should not hinder your appreciation of these distinguished birds. They don't show up in large numbers but they make a grand appearance when they do arrive.

I hope you have the chance to watch one as it perches nearby to observe and hunt other birds.

If you don't like to watch the feeding process, at least enjoy the chase as a Cooper's Hawk swoops in. Their speed and agility are remarkable.

Good luck.