

Accipiters

The **northern goshawk** (*Accipiter gentilis*) and the **sharp-shinned hawk** (*Accipiter striatus*) are the Alaskan representatives of a group of hawks known as accipiters, with short, rounded wings (short in comparison with other hawks) and long tails. The third North American accipiter, the Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) is not found in Alaska. Both native species are abundant in the state but not commonly seen, for they spend the majority of their time in wooded habitats. When they do venture out into the open, the accipiters can be recognized easily by their "several flaps and a glide" style of flight.

General Description: Adult northern goshawks are bluish-gray on the back, wings, and tail, and pearly gray on the breast and underparts. The dark gray cap is accented by a light gray stripe above the red eye. Like most birds of prey, female goshawks are larger than males. A typical female is 25 inches (65 cm) long, has a wingspread of 45 inches (115 cm) and weighs 2¼ pounds (1020 g) while the average male is 19½ inches (50 cm) in length with a wingspread of 39 inches (100 cm) and weighs 2 pounds (880 g).

Adult sharp-shinned hawks have gray backs, wings and tails (males tend to be bluish-gray, while females are browner) with white underparts barred heavily with brownish-orange. They also have red eyes but, unlike goshawks, have no eyestripe. A typical female weighs 6 ounces (170 g), is 13½ inches (35 cm) long with a wingspread of 25 inches (65 cm), while the average male weighs 3½ ounces (100 g), is 10 inches (25 cm) long and has a wingspread of 21 inches (55 cm).

In both species, immature birds are brown on the back, wings and tail, with buff-colored underparts streaked with brown. The eyes of young accipiters are yellow; it takes several years for them to change to the red of adults. Young goshawks have a buff eyestripe. In both species, the long tail is broadly banded with dark gray in adults and dark brown in immatures. The tail is tipped with white in adults and buff in immatures.

Food Habits: Accipiters are adept at flying quickly through dense woods in search of their favored prey. The hawks' short, broad wings enable them to accelerate rapidly, and their long tails are efficient rudders for steering around trees. The birds employ this ability to negotiate wooded habitats in hunting. They perch quietly in trees or move stealthily from perch to perch. When prey is sighted, they make a rapid dash after it. If the intended prey is not caught quickly, the pursuit is dropped after a short distance. When the hawks do get close, they reach out with their long legs and grab the animal with powerful, taloned feet. Goshawks have tremendously strong feet and legs and are capable of subduing large prey, such as snowshoe hares, grouse, ptarmigan, and ducks. They also eat squirrels, voles, shrews, and some of the larger songbirds and shorebirds. In contrast, the more maneuverable sharpshinned hawks have proportionally longer, narrower toes and are more efficient at capturing songbirds. Sharp-shins also eat a few small mammals and occasionally catch large insects. Typically, a few feathers or tufts of fur are ingested with each meal. These, along with bones and fragments of insect exoskeleton, are not digested but are bundled into compact "pellets" and regurgitated. Pellets can often be found among prey remains near the birds' favorite perches (accipiters usually take their kills to "plucking perches" or "butcher blocks" where they pull out the feathers or fur of prey before eating it). Pellets and other remains provide biologists with valuable clues to the hawks' diets.

Life History: While accipiters can and do exploit a variety of habitats for hunting, they prefer to nest in mixed stands of coniferous and deciduous trees. They often return to the same general area in successive years and will occasionally reuse an old nest. The area immediately surrounding the nest is vigorously defended against intruders—the adults scream and dive at interlopers, slashing and grabbing at the offenders with their feet.

Northern goshawks build large stick nests, usually in a major crotch of birch or aspen trees. Nesting usually begins in early to mid-April, often when there is still snow on the ground. Goshawks lay one to four eggs, with three or four being the most common clutch sizes. Young goshawks hatch in late May or early June, grow quickly, and fledge in early to mid-July. The young birds remain in the vicinity of the nest as they develop their powers of flight and sharpen their hunting skills. The parents continue to feed their offspring for as long as the young birds remain in the area, often until early August. Northern goshawks do not make long-distance migrations and can be found year-round throughout their range in Alaska.

Sharp-shinned hawks nest most frequently in middle-age (25-45 years old) spruce trees. They usually build their bulky twig nests close to the trunk midway up the nest tree. Sharp-shins lay three to six eggs (most commonly five or six) in late April or early May, and the young hatch about 35 days later. Young sharp-shins grow rapidly and fledge 22 to 25 days after hatching—about the same time that young goshawks are leaving the nest.

Sharp-shins follow the same post-fledging pattern as goshawks, but their dispersal from the nest area is faster. Most sharp-shins follow waves of migrating songbirds in the fall and spend the winter in the warmer regions, although some individuals overwinter in Southcentral and Southeast Alaska.

Because young accipiters usually weigh less than their parents and have slightly longer flight feathers, their wing loading is lower (i.e., less weight distributed over a large wing area). This enables young birds to fly slower and more buoyantly than adults, but they still occasionally fall victim to their own clumsiness and fatally miscalculate a landing. A large number of birds succumb to other hazards, including disease, predation, flying into windows, being shot by humans, and being struck by vehicles. The first hard freeze of the year eliminates many birds, especially those sharp-shinned hawks which have not yet gone south. Goshawks also fall victim to the weather; birds which are barely able to catch enough food to stay alive in warm weather don't survive for long when cold weather increases the food intake requirements. As many as 80-90 percent of birds die during their first winter.

Northern goshawks have few enemies in the wild other than the elements. They are rarely caught in a position where they are unable to either defend themselves or evade their attacker. They are most vulnerable when the female is incubating eggs or brooding small nestlings and when the young are first learning to fly. At these times, other large hawks or owls occasionally kill goshawks; and bears, lynx, and other climbing predators sometimes reach nests and eat young birds. Sharp-shinned hawks have similar enemies, including the goshawk itself. Although many goshawks are killed in the name of defense of poultry or other small livestock, only a few birds actually deserve the oft-applied title, "chicken hawk."

While it is illegal to kill raptors, the goshawk and the sharp-shinned hawk may be kept in captivity by falconers, providing they have the required permit, which is issued jointly by state and federal authorities.

Preservation of Alaska's raptors depends on research and habitat protection. Increased knowledge and preservation of critical habitat will help perpetuate the woodland hawks of Alaska.



Text: Ronald G. Clarke
Illustration: ADF&G
Revised and reprinted 2008