

AVIAN PREDATOR VISITS TO FEEDING AND BANDING STATIONS

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It has become clear to me that predators and, in particular, avian predators make regular and frequent visits to feeding and banding stations. As a bander and having maintained to some extent bird feeding stations the year around for about 35 years, I have experienced many visits from avian predators and can almost predict when to look for such a "visitor" based on the weather conditions.

I have observed the following species of avian predator at my particular location:

Northern Harrier: on about two occasions, during long hard winter conditions when deep snows limited food availability.

Sharp-shinned Hawk: almost on a year around basis and almost on a two to three day schedule the summer and fall 1993.

Cooper's Hawk: not as frequent as Sharp-shinned Hawk in summer or fall but much more common during the winter months in my area. Sometimes seen in pairs. This species and the previous species have been observed walking on the ground hunting for birds hiding under feeding tables and platforms.

Northern Goshawk: infrequent and only in the most severe winters, usually immature birds.

Red-tailed Hawk: only during severe winter conditions when snow cover is deep.

American Kestrel: usually in winter or early spring. Some years ago I observed a small male which consistently attacked and killed male Evening Grosbeak at my feeder, quite a feat since Evening Grosbeak will bite viciously while being banded.

Merlin: occasional in the early fall and early spring while passing through in migration. Their high speed maneuvering in hot pursuit of a House Finch or other species is most interesting to watch.

Eastern Screech-Owl: one winter an individual attempted to catch House Sparrow without success.

Northern Shrike: regular winter visitor when they are are numerous locally. They particularly attack birds in banding traps and will kill and pull birds through the wire mesh of the trap. On two occasions, they even left a regurgitated pellet of bird and small mammal parts after feeding. They also will take *Microtus* that are attracted to waste seed and at times vole travel tunnels can be very visible if you shovel out the snow under your feeders.

Winter is the best time to look for visits by these species. Visibility for observing an act of predation is also optimal because the leaves are gone and snow covers the ground. Bad weather, such as approaching snow storms, often seems to trigger a visit.

Food sources at this time of year are limited for avian predators, so flocks of passerine birds make good targets of opportunity, all the more because they are less wary and are concentrated at feeding stations. In my experience the prey species most apt to be taken are the species present in greatest numbers at a feeding station, such as House Finch, American Tree Sparrow, House Sparrow, American Goldfinch, and European Starling. In a year with a winter finch invasion, Common Redpoll can be the main prey item. The Mourning Dove seems to be an exception. By spring, no matter how many or few visit the station, about one half have been captured, primarily by accipiters. I have never observed Black-capped Chickadee to be preyed upon and I have even seen them land with complete disregard on a branch next to both Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks. Chickadees do react to the presence of Northern Shrike and depart for cover with the other birds when one appears.

Many times the only proof of a kill is a group of feathers found on the snow and or a few drops of blood here and there. Accipiters will often leave the crop and some attached intestines with a blood circle marking the spot where a larger bird such as a Mourning Dove or European Starling had been the prey item but could not be carried off any distance. A few feathers blowing across the snow will give you a clue that one of your feeder visitors has been taken.

I am sure that the loss at feeding and banding stations will not cause problems to the population of a particular species. I do believe the loss is much greater than one would guess from visual sightings. Annually I notice an average loss of about eight individual birds to avian predators. I suspect that the actual loss may be three to four times this number, and perhaps more.

I have also found that the avian predators attracted to my feeding activities may become a casualty from collision with windows, etc., while in pursuit of prey. I also have found avian predators in a starved and weakened condition which results in their death from the cold and freezing weather. These birds usually are young of the year, that perhaps have not fully learned how to capture prey and have been drawn to a feeder seeking food among the many visitors.

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