

(Jeff Lemons)



Accipitridae the KITES, EAGLES, HAWKS, and HARRIERS

The family Accipitridae includes the kites, eagles, harriers, and hawks. It is a highly variable grouping of over 125 species that are spread worldwide. Taxonomists are still working out how to properly classify these birds, and some of their lineages are in dispute. Each bird in this family has a sharp, hooked bill, sharp talons, and excellent eyesight. Almost all are diurnal and carnivorous. The term “hawk” is a general term that has been often misapplied to various birds of prey in this family, as well as to falcons and the Osprey which are classified in entirely separate families.

Hawks were once considered “vermin” by many hunters and farmers who felt these birds were a threat to local game birds and livestock. Before and through the time of the Great Depression, the loss of a single chicken from the farmyard could mean a family going hungry, and the killing of a hawk meant a great deal to subsistence level farmers. Therefore, hawks were subject to decades of carnage in the 1800s and early 1900s. Some local communities even had a designated “hawk hunter” that people would call upon when they couldn’t handle the job themselves. There are a myriad of examples of newspaper accounts applauding the successful trapping, shooting, and poisoning of hawks throughout the Carolina Piedmont.

On December 29, 1868, just after the Civil War, a piece carried in Charlotte’s *Western Democrat* newspaper offered this advice to readers on how to use dead hawks to protect their orchards from fruit eating birds: “The most effective plan we ever tried was by killing, ourself, or hiring some boys to kill, a number of Chicken or Sparrow Hawks, skin and stuff them, then place them on the tops of some of the trees in the orchard. But few birds would attack the fruit in an orchard with such apparent enemies to meet.”

Most of these published stories were anecdotal accounts that were considered locally newsworthy:

“Mr. John Waggoner seems to be somewhat rough on fowls all at once. The other week he shot a large owl, and with it he baited his steel-trap. In a short time he caught two hawks and one yellow-hammer in his trap.”

—*North Carolina Herald*, Salisbury, March 11, 1886

“There is one particular hawk that some body must shoot or I’ll have to shoot him. He seems to have a particular fondness for fresh fledged pigeons that are trying to learn to fly. The hawk soars and also soars around and scoops down on the poor young things before they can hit the ground when falling out a barn window.”

—*The Hickory Press*, March 5, 1896

“Mrs. Nance had a novel experience killing a hawk last week. She has a large number of chickens and was out standing in the midst throwing them food when a hawk darted on a half grown chicken by her side and the chickens scattered. She grabbed the hawk by the tail and placing her foot on its head beat it to death with a stick. All was done quickly and almost before Mrs. Nance had realized what she had done. Mrs. Nance was an elderly lady.”

—Gaston County near Stanley, printed in *The Charlotte News*, February 4, 1903

On February 28, 1909, *The Charlotte Observer* ran this obituary: “Zenus Porter, the Hawk Hunter, is Dead...Mr. Zenus Porter, of Sharon township, Mecklenburg County, was one of the most interesting characters in North Carolina. He farmed for a livelihood and hunted for a pastime. As a boy he chased the fox, hunted quail and rabbits, but as a grown-up he devoted his attention to trapping minks, weasels, otters, and killing hawks and owls. In other words, he became the guardian of the hen house. Several weeks ago Mr. Porter died at a ripe age at his home near Hebron. For fifty years he killed on an average about 100 hawks and owls a season. The housewives of his community gave him a feast for every hawk or owl he killed in appreciation of his services.”

Early twentieth century government studies concluded that, in contrast to their bad reputation, hawks were actually beneficial to the environment and that most hawks did not hunt livestock or negatively impact populations of game birds. Scientists tried to educate the public about the benefits of hawks to encourage hawk conservation and to convince people that most hawks were actually helpful to the farmer.

“While on the subject of hawks, we will take the time to say that the indiscriminate classification of hawks as pirates is a great mistake. The government has issued repeated bulletins, calling attention to the fact that most hawks spend the greater part of their lives killing grasshoppers, mice and rats.” —*The Monroe Journal*, August 12, 1921

Unfortunately, few knowledgeable people were willing to publicly fight to defend birds of prey from the ongoing slaughter—even while many fought adamantly to protect migratory birds at the state and national levels. Frank Chapman is the most notable exception. In 1900, Chapman began the Audubon Christmas Bird Counts as a way to stop the traditional Christmas “side hunts” targeting hawks and other animals.

Passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 protected most birds under federal law, however state designated “game” birds were specifically excluded. In North Carolina, the list of birds designated as “game” birds included: English Sparrows, crows, blackbirds, jackdaws (grackles), hawks, owls, robins, and larks (meadowlarks), and later starlings and buzzards (vultures) as well. From 1928 through 1935, the state offered cash bounties on many of these birds, at times paying out as much as \$5,000 in a single year. According to one Carolina observer, “The result was the indiscriminate slaughter of all hawks.” By 1935, the North Carolina law was updated to protect three hawks perceived as “beneficial” to agriculture because they ate rodents. These were the Red-tailed Hawk, the Red-shouldered Hawk and the Sparrowhawk (the American Kestrel—which is actually a falcon). Unprotected raptors could be killed, possessed, bought, sold, or transported at any time, in any manner, including their nests and eggs. There was only one restriction: poisons and dynamite were not permitted for use when taking these birds.

In 1938, Dr. John Grey, the first editor of *The Chat*, wrote: “Our people still have not learned that hawks are valuable birds if left alive. The newspapers have carried many items and pictures of hunters who have killed large hawks. Richard H. Pough of the National Association of Audubon Societies has sent numerous clippings from state papers to the Department of Conservation and to *The Chat* calling our attention to the great number of hawks that have been killed this year. In his opinion North Carolina has a dubious honor in being first [among states] in hawk killing.”

During the second half of the twentieth century, national, state, and local campaigns were implemented to help better educate the public about the importance of all raptors. Laws were modified and enforced more regularly and public perception slowly changed. Since the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s, hawks and other birds of prey have been generally more valued than vilified by people in both Carolinas.

Regrettably, the shooting of birds of prey remains an ongoing problem. In 2016, a wealthy South Carolina landowner who was a trustee of the state university and was described as a “pillar of the community” was convicted and fined \$75,000 after pleading guilty to baiting and trapping Red-tailed Hawks and then shooting them in cages. For years he and his employees engaged in the systematic trapping and killing of hawks on his quail farm, killing 31 in 2013 and 2014 alone. Fortunately, the overall incidence of hawk killing has declined, and the future looks much brighter for these magnificent birds of prey.

In the Central Carolinas, we have documented the Bald Eagle, the Northern Harrier, two species of kites, two species of hawks in the genus *Accipiter*, and four species of hawks in the genus *Buteo*. In addition to these, the Golden Eagle has been confirmed in the region. It is discussed in the Supplementary Bird List.

“The hawks are much more numerous in Winter than in Summer. In the last few days I have seen the marsh hawk, the sharp-shinned hawk, the Cooper’s hawk and the sparrowhawk and I have heard the ‘Kee-er, kee-er, kee-er’ of the red-shouldered hawk. I do not happen to have seen in recent weeks the red-tailed hawk, but he is undoubtedly here.” —William McIlwaine, in an early address given on WBT radio, November 18, 1930, in Charlotte