

Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus*



Folk Name: Little Blue Darter, Blue-tailed Darter, Sharpstriker

Status: Migrant, Winter Resident, sporadic Breeder

Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Woodlands and urban and suburban woodlots

The Sharp-shinned Hawk and its larger relative, the Cooper's Hawk, are together classified as accipiters. They are sleek, agile, fast-flying woodland hawks which specialize in hunting other birds, especially songbirds. Adaptations such as longer middle toes and unusually large eyes help them catch birds in flight. Both have been vilified and persecuted for over a century by local farmers as "bird thieves" and "chicken hawks," and even our earliest state ornithologists acknowledged that these two accipiters were indeed "bold marauders of the farmer's chicken yard."

Our two accipiters can be hard to tell apart. Sharp-shinned Hawks are smaller than Cooper's Hawks, averaging 11 inches versus about 17 inches in length. However, in both species, females are larger than males, and female Sharpies can be as large as small male Cooper's Hawks. Sharpies have a shorter tail that is noticeably squared off at the end. The Cooper's tail is longer and rounded. In flight, the head of the Sharpie appears small, while the Cooper's head appears large. The Sharpie flies with quick, sharp wing flaps, while the wing beats of the Cooper's Hawk are markedly slower.

"[The] Little Blue Darter...is the greyhound of the air, the 'feathered lightning' which never strikes but once in the same place, because, as the boys say, 'he don't have to.' He is so swift of wing, and turns and darts so quickly, that few birds escape when he starts after them. Their only chance for life is to get into a near-by bush or close-limbed tree." —*Our Bird Book*, 1917

The Sharp-shinned Hawk can be seen in the region during all months of the year. It is most common during fall migration. Hawk Watch data from the region collected at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge in Mecklenburg County and Riverbend Park in Catawba County, indicate Sharpies are most abundant during late September and early October. Up to 75 have been sighted in just a few hours, flying high overhead on their journey south. Many of these migrants are seen soaring and taking advantage of thermals to circle high up into the sky, before peeling off and heading south to winter in Florida and areas further south. In spring, northbound migrants banded in our region have been recaptured in West Virginia and Michigan.



The Sharp-shinned Hawk is widely recognized as being a "secretive" bird. This guarded behavior means birders may be overlooking it during both breeding and winter seasons, so this bird's true abundance is unclear. Small numbers are tallied here each winter and they are seldom missed on Christmas Bird Counts, but actual census estimates are uncertain. The Sharpie is most rare during breeding season, but it does breed "sparingly" in both Carolinas.

Due to its secretive nature, relatively few actual nesting records have been published. In North Carolina, only six breeding records had been confirmed by 1959, only 14 more observations during breeding season were added by 1980, and sight records during breeding season have been sporadic since. In South Carolina, only one nest had been confirmed by 1989. One was reported in 1990, and three Sharp-shinned Hawk nests were reported in South Carolina in 1991, with two confirmed. In *The South Carolina Breeding Bird Atlas*, published in 2003,



Sharp-shinned Hawk at banding station. (MCPRD)

ornithologist John Cely speculated that “Sharp-shinned Hawks are probably more widespread nesters in South Carolina than generally recognized.”

Since 1980, there have been over a dozen sight reports of Sharp-shinned Hawks during the breeding season in the Central Carolinas. Reports have come from across the region. All were recorded from June through mid-July.

We have about 15 reports of nesting or possible nesting on file. In the late 1800s, Leverett Loomis designated the Sharp-shinned Hawk as a resident bird in Chester County, but he did not provide any nesting details. Our earliest nest confirmation comes from Mecklenburg County. Frank Brown reported a Sharpie “shot from its nest by a boy” near Davidson on May 3, 1932. The nest was “30 ft. up in a small pine located in a thick clump of ‘spruce pines’ ” which are commonly called “Virginia” pines today. This nest contained eggs, but it had been “shot to pieces” on the morning of his visit. In the second edition of *Birds of North Carolina*, the authors state that “the same day a boy shot a Sharp-shin from its nest near Statesville in Iredell County”; however, a review of original letters sent from Frank and Elmer Brown

indicate that both accounts are of the same nest located on the border of Mecklenburg and Iredell County near Davidson College.

Lex Glover reported successful nesting in Lancaster County on July 11, 1991. He observed two fledglings out of the nest near the town of Kershaw. A review of the Carolina Raptor Center intake records from 1980 through 2015 shows almost 20 records of either flightless (“local”) young or recently fledged (“hatch year”) young brought in from both Carolinas during the months of June and July. About a dozen of these were brought in from this region. A few examples are shared here. Two flightless young were found in a nest in a tree that was cut down in Shelby, Cleveland County, on July 3, 1981. A newly fledged bird hit a window in Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, on July 23, 1981. Two flightless young were found in a nest in a tree that was cut down in Vale, Lincoln County, on June 24, 1991. A newly fledged bird hit a window in Gastonia, Gaston County, on June 29, 1991.

In North Carolina, the breeding population of the Sharp-shinned Hawk is designated “Significantly Rare,” and it is considered “imperiled” and “very vulnerable” to extirpation from the state.