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Top: Cooper’s hawk.  
Above: Ruby-throated hummingbird.  
Right: Sharp-shinned hawk.
A female Costa’s hummingbird incubates two tiny eggs.
Like so many people, I’ve been working from home since mid-March. I miss my co-workers, but I’m enjoying watching the wildlife in my yard. Check out the totally adorable squirrels who nest in the hole in the big old silver maple tree in front of my house! That hole is at eye level with my home office window, and thanks to working from home, I get to enjoy the squirrels’ antics! I also spotted a female purple finch checking out the sunflower seed feeder that hangs next to the window. I’d have missed both of these treats, plus the flock of cedar waxwings in the tree across the street, if I had been working in the Bird Watcher’s Digest and Watching Backyard Birds headquarters!

Apparently, that’s the silver lining of COVID-19: Lots of people have been noticing and appreciating the birds around them; some, perhaps, for the first time! Welcome to all the new subscribers to this magazine! We hope you enjoy it and find it helpful and inspiring.

Those new to backyard bird watching or new to backyard bird feeding should be prepared: You may spot a hawk in your backyard, perhaps eyeing your feeders for its next meal—and I don’t mean seed or suet. I adore the chickadees, cardinals, wrens, finches, and occasional woodpeckers that visit my feeders, and I did find it disturbing the one time I spotted a Cooper’s hawk grab one of “my” chickadees. But a hawk’s gotta eat, too. Somehow, I don’t mind seeing a pile of pigeon feathers in my yard—evidence that the neighborhood Coop has visited again. The pigeon flock in my neighborhood is huge and growing.

It is always a thrill to spot a Coop, a sharp-shinned, or red-shouldered hawk in my neighborhood, and I often do. I hope this issue of WBB encourages you to enjoy and appreciate your backyard hawks—and other birds, too, of course.

Best wishes for great backyard birding this summer,

Dawn Hewitt
WBB team captain
Cover Species

Cooper’s Hawk: This Bird Hunter Is Moving into Town

Gayle A. Robison
I had seen the hawk before, many times, though perhaps it was another of the same species. This one was clearly a juvenile female: breast white with brown streaks, yellow-eyed, large as a crow—she danced atop the remains of a pigeon on my front lawn.

Head turning to the side, then back again, she was more than a little wary. I am quite certain she heard me before I ever saw her. Then the neighbor began raking leaves on the sidewalk, and she grew more nervous. Talons tearing at its victim’s absent breast, her scimitar beak dipped a few more times to pick at the flesh.

Finally she could take no more of the human presence that disturbed her meal. She flapped those great wings twice and came to rest in the flowering plum tree, just eight feet from where I stood at the bedroom window.

We peered at each other cautiously. She blinked—I did not. She turned to watch the carcass, then the neighbor. I watched, frozen. A few more seconds of surveying her realm, and she took flight over my roof.

A Cooper’s hawk, she is but one of many who have made my yard in suburban Los Angeles a hunting ground over the past decade or two. They come to feast on the mourning doves gathering up spilled seed at the feeders; they also take pigeons from their roost at the restaurant half a block away. Three or four times a year I find a pile of feathers, or even a partially eaten bird, sometimes on the lawn or under one of my many fruit trees, and occasionally hung on the fence among the grapevines, like macabre ornaments.

These graceful accipiters might perch on the power poles or in the top of the fig tree, but they do not often hunt for prey while soaring over open areas, as do the redtails. Natives of dense forest, they have adapted to our tree-filled suburban environment with remarkable ease.

They have few enemies in Los Angeles. But picture windows lure them to nowhere,
bringing their endeavors to an abrupt halt. And there is a deadly threat to Cooper’s hawk fledglings in the form of trichomoniasis, a protozoa parasite carried by the remains of affected doves and pigeons brought by well-meaning hawk parents who have no comprehension of microbial pathogens or avian epidemiology.

Cooper’s hawk numbers are stable, and may be increasing regionally, after decades of direct persecution (shooting) in the first half of the 20th century, and pesticide contamination in the second half.

My accipiter friend was not about to relinquish her dinner to the gardener’s shovel. Within two hours the hawk returned silently to retrieve the pigeon, carrying it into the fig tree, where she busied herself long enough to leave the familiar pile of white feathers. When I stepped out into the backyard to water the vegetable garden, she left for good, leftovers grasped tightly in powerful talons, winging her way toward points unknown.

I can overlook the blood and gore and pain of the scene. A valued and admired strand in the delicate web of life, a predator has done another days’ work of improving prey species, selecting for faster and smarter doves and pigeons—not a bad thing at all, and I wish her well.

Gayle A. Robison is a veterinarian and bird watcher who lives in Encino, California.
Cooper’s Hawk: The Perfect Backyard Dinosaur

Jeffrey A. Gordon

Birds, we are told, are the most direct descendants of dinosaurs. This can be a difficult claim to believe while you coo over a hummingbird delicately sipping from the salvia in the window box, or while you watch a flock of mourning doves calmly vacuum up in 10 minutes what you’d hoped would be a week’s supply of sunflower seed.

It’s a lot easier to get the whole bird-dinosaur connection when a Cooper’s hawk arrives on the scene. Think of all those dinosaur movies where T. rex is about to make its grand and terrifying entrance. The camera pans over an Edenic scene as various vegetarian creatures placidly graze. Suddenly, heads whip around and fern-filled jaws go slack, then tighten in terror. Everybody dives for cover as the fearsome star of our show makes its earth-shaking, tree-felling appearance onscreen, often seizing the one hapless beast that wasn’t paying close enough attention. The audience squeals and squirms with a mix of terror and delight.

If you’ve ever seen a Cooper’s hawk explode into your yard and cause most birds to scatter, a few others to freeze like stones, and, often, one to become lunch, then I’m sure you’ll see the parallel here. It’s both thrilling and chilling to have a Coop make a marauding visit to your yard—part of you wants to punch the air and roar with exhilaration, and part of you wants to protect the little guys. It’s high drama for sure.
I’ll never forget being in Cape May, New Jersey, one late-fall day and watching a Cooper’s hawk come bombing into a hedgerow of leafless forsythia bushes where a troop of house sparrows was lounging noisily. The hawk shot through the upper corner of the hedge, came out empty-footed, then wheeled around and landed on the ground as the terrified, now-silent house sparrows tried to insinuate themselves as deeply into the twigs as possible.

It was what happened next that really made an impression on me. That Cooper’s hawk hitched itself up on its stocky yellow legs and ran—ran—skittering across the ground into the heart of those bushes, a comedy-horror hybrid starring Foghorn Leghorn and a velociraptor from Jurassic Park.

Those house sparrows didn’t see anything funny about it, though. Having cheated death from above and sought shelter close to the earth, they were now having to reverse course and get up and away. I never did see whether the hawk caught a sparrow, but there was an aura of grim determination about that Cooper’s hawk’s efforts that I can still feel now, and which still gives me just the faintest bit of a shiver.

I see and hear Cooper’s hawks quite a bit these days. In fact, I think they’ve pulled even with red-tailed hawk as the raptor species I’m most likely to encounter while driving around town doing errands.

I see them sailing across suburban backyards, emerging from a row of cedars and clearing a half dozen privacy fences before vanishing into the depths of an ornamental crabapple. If I happen to miss one circling over the rooftops of the commercial district, the starlings make sure I see it, shoaling around in an angry black ball—a school of small-fries empowered by the realization that with numbers and cunning, they can defeat the shark.
When I get midsummer calls from people with hawks in their yards—something with increasing frequency—it’s always Cooper’s hawks. Always.

“Are they all right?” the concerned callers ask. “I think they might be babies—they’re making an awful lot of noise!”

I assure them that fledgling Cooper’s hawks keep their parents informed of their hunger level loudly and often. I ask if the screaming hawks are in a safe place, and the usual answer is that they are high in a line of trees, often conifers, along the end or side of the yard.

“That’s exactly what they should be doing,” I tell the callers. “Don’t worry, they’ll be fine.”

Cooper’s hawks do seem to be doing fine at the same time so many other birds, including raptors, are declining. This could have something to do with the reforestation of suburbia, as subdivisions that were cleared several decades ago have had a chance to regrow stands of trees mature enough to entice Coops to nest.

In winter, sharp-shinned hawks and even sometimes red-shouldered hawks join the Cooper’s as backyard reapers. Most questions I get then
concern the identity of the rapacious visitors and how they might be disinvited from the banquet. I usually advocate a philosophical approach. Hawks have to eat, too—the balance of nature, that sort of thing.

“Besides,” I say, “Cooper’s hawks are known to eat chipmunks, even squirrels.”

It’s starting to seem, in the East anyway, like Cooper’s are undergoing a population explosion. But others opine that numbers of eastern Cooper’s were depressed during the first half of the 20th century, often citing the recreational and market hunting that continued well into the 1940s as a causal factor. The numbers we’re seeing now aren’t an explosion, some say—they’re a rebound.

One thing that hasn’t changed is that the separation of Cooper’s from sharp-shinned hawks—and at some times and places, northern goshawks—is still a classic field identification problem. It doesn’t really go away as one advances in skill, it just changes. Once upon a time, I mostly just worked to see the shape of the tail tip on raptors, because I assumed that to be the criti-
cal piece of information for diagnosing round-tailed Cooper’s from straight-edged sharpies. Now I’ve learned that there’s a lot more to look for—all kinds of subtle plumage characteristics to evaluate, and even more important, impressions of shape, posture, attitude, and flight style.

Bird populations change, sometimes for the better. Our knowledge of birds and their identification becomes more refined and sophisticated, both as individuals and collectively. But there is still plenty more to learn, plenty of opportunity to be surprised.

I love the Cooper’s hawk. This is a bird that seems to cover a lot of ground, varying not only in its colors but also in its size and shape. The young are big and streaky brown, their parents more svelte and put-together in their handsome blue and brick colors with their black caps.

A Coop can be the consummate deep-forest denizen, staying out of sight and undetected. But then the same bird will indulge in a display flight, circling lazily in plain view over the treetops with exaggerated slow, deep flaps, his fluffy white undertail coverts puffed out so far they sometimes wrap up and over the tail base.

At times they seem relaxed, at others almost clownish. But then they snap into action, and everybody had better look out. They’re the perfect backyard dinosaur.

Female Cooper’s hawks are significantly larger than males, but it is impossible to judge size from most photos.

Jeffrey A. Gordon is president of the American Birding Association. He lives in Delaware City, Delaware.
To the Editor:

As we got older, we developed a feeding station with water features for the birds near our dining area.

As we were watching the hummingbirds, I started naming the birds, based on their behavior, with our grandchildren. We had Nervous Nellie, Sitting Sally, and others. The kids all enjoyed watching their favorites and felt a relationship to them.

We watched together as some birds sit and eat and some like to find a morsel and fly away with it—then return for seconds. We learned to listen for woodpeckers to watch for them to return for more food. The kids liked knowing which were boy birds and which were girl birds.

We had trouble distinguishing hairy and downy woodpeckers since size can be misleading unless they are side by side. Your advice in the April issue—to look at the size of the beak relative to the size of the head—is a great help. With the grandchildren, we started using Huge Harry and Dapper Downy to remember which was which.

Like other bird lovers, we have a clock with pictures of the birds that plays their calls on the hour. Our son and grandson were visiting once, and my son mentioned a titmouse at one of the feeders. Our grandson immediately corrected him: “No, Dad, that’s a tufted titmouse!”

The bottom line is that with enthusiasm and memorable names youngsters can become enthralled with birds, and catch on to the fun of watching birds and their behavior. I admit that we enjoy Nervous Nellie and the others just as much as the grandkids do.

Gene James
Siesta Key, Florida, and Dayton, Ohio
Mantids Threaten Hummingbirds

In the June issue of *WBB*, we warned you about the threat of burdock to hummingbirds. Another potential threat to hummingbirds may be lurking in your yard. The photos are too gruesome to publish, but there are plenty on the internet of mantises killing hummingbirds. Three species are common across North America (praying, Carolina, and Chinese). Many gardeners appreciate these insects because they voraciously eat garden pests. But if there is a mantis on your nectar feeder, you’d be wise to relocate it to your vegetable garden.
Reminder: Wash Your Bird Feeders!

Although it is rare—even unheard of—for humans to become sick from handling a bird feeder, there is no doubt that microorganisms flourish on their surface. That’s why it’s important for you to wash your hands after handling your feeders, including after refilling them. Much more of a threat are illnesses and diseases spread among the birds that visit and share feeders.

To keep your feeder birds healthy, and to prevent the spread of disease, follow these steps:

1. Clean your feeders and birdbaths regularly—at least once a month, and more often during periods of heavy use. Wash nectar feeders every time before refilling.
2. Wait until your feeders are empty, or nearly so, before washing. Do not reuse seed that was in your dirty feeders; it may be invisibly contaminated with disease-carrying microorganisms.
3. Before washing, scrape out as much gunk and debris as possible and throw it away.
4. If necessary, use a screwdriver and wrench to disassemble the feeder completely to extract rotting seed from otherwise inaccessible areas of the feeder.
5. Wash your feeders in a utility tub or a bucket, and not in your kitchen sink.
6. Use liquid dish soap to remove gunk if necessary, but be sure to rinse extra thoroughly. Note: Dish soap does not disinfect contamination, and is not necessary.
7. Using a solution of nine-parts water to one-part bleach, scrub the feeder with a brush and/or bottle brush, then let it soak in the solution for ten minutes. Rinse well, and let it air-dry.

As part of your monthly (or more frequent) bird-feeder cleaning efforts, attend to the ground beneath your feeders. Ground-feeding birds such as doves and pigeons, sparrows, quail, and many other birds forage beneath feeders for spilled seed. If that seed or the hulls are contaminated, disease can spread to birds that have never touched your feeders. Rake up waste hulls and throw them away. Spread a thick layer of wood mulch beneath the feeder. Relocate your feeder at least a few feet away from the previous location several times a year, and plant grass or wildflowers in the previous location. It will already have been well-fertilized!

If you are not willing to commit to keeping your bird feeders clean, it is better to take them down and stop feeding the birds. Birds can find food and survive without human help, but they might not survive a contaminated bird feeder.
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The Nikon Monarch 5 8x42 is understandably popular with bird watchers of all stripes. This mid-priced binocular delivers dependable performance in virtually any birding situation. Equipped with Nikon’s ED glass and high-tech dielectric prism coatings, the optics on the Monarch 5 offer a great deal of bang for your buck. Couple the outstanding optics with the waterproof and fog-proof construction, and you’ve got yourself an outstanding birding binocular for under $300. The Nikon Monarch 5 8x42 is covered by Nikon’s limited lifetime warranty. $279.95

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Create a bird sanctuary in your own backyard with the help of the Backyard Guide series, written by Bill Thompson, III, and Kyle Carlsen of the Bird Watcher’s Digest editorial team. Each convenient guidebook profiles 55 of the most common birds that you are likely to encounter in the featured region: Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, South, or West. $17.99 each

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