

***Vilified by some but treasured by others, the Sparrowhawk is one of our most widespread and familiar birds of prey. The Sparrowhawk population has now recovered most of the ground lost as a result of earlier persecution and the effects of harmful pesticides.***

Viewed as a threat by game-rearing interests, the Sparrowhawk has been persecuted throughout much of recent history. However, it was a very different threat that saw the Sparrowhawk nearly exterminated from large parts of its former range, notably across southern and eastern England. This came in the form of organochlorine pesticides, introduced widely after the Second World War. Pesticides like DDT, Aldrin and Dieldrin brought about increased mortality of adult Sparrowhawks and also made Sparrowhawk eggshells more prone to breakage. As a result the population crashed and it was only when these compounds were banned that the population began to recover. BTO studies have monitored the recovery, charting increased breeding success and a return to former haunts. This recovery has also seen birds increasingly reported from suburban and urban locations (Sparrowhawks were reported breeding in inner London in 1993 for the first time in nearly four decades); it is this that has brought the Sparrowhawk into conflict with some garden birdwatchers.



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### ***The Sparrowhawk as a predator of small birds***

A number of independent, scientifically rigorous studies have looked for potential interactions between Sparrowhawks and their prey. None of these studies has found any evidence that Sparrowhawk predation has had any long term effects on the breeding populations of songbirds, either at the national level (work published by Thomson *et al.* in 1998) or at individual sites (work published by Perrins & Geer in 1980 and by Newton *et al.* in 1997). Several studies carried out on tit populations in the non-breeding season, and looking at Sparrowhawk predation, demonstrate a reduction in the size of the post-breeding peak in tit numbers in the presence of Sparrowhawks, together with a change in the pattern of seasonal mortality. However, the size of the breeding population the following year remained unchanged, suggesting that Sparrowhawk predation is compensatory and that predation is just one of a number of different factors limiting the size of the tit population (other factors include starvation and competition). In the absence of Sparrowhawk predation, other factors exert greater influence and so the tit population the following year remains similar, with or without Sparrowhawks present.

A large bird of prey, possibly a hawk or eagle, is shown in flight against a white background. The bird is facing left, with its wings spread wide. The feathers are detailed with dark and light patterns, particularly on the wings and tail. The bird's head is turned slightly towards the viewer, showing its sharp beak and dark eyes. The overall image is high-contrast and clear.

## A European Starling is shown perched on a green wire bird feeder. The bird has a yellow beak and a dark body with iridescent purple and blue feathers. It is facing left. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

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## Learn more about your garden birds



**Join Garden BirdWatch today for just £15 and get the acclaimed 'Gardening for Birdwatchers' free.**

*Gardens are great places in which to find out more about birds and their behaviour, making garden birdwatching a very pleasurable pastime. For example, did you know that some of your wintering Blackbirds will have come from Poland, Germany and even Russia!*

*The British Trust for Ornithology monitors the changing fortunes of those birds that use our gardens through the BTO Garden BirdWatch. The project involves more than 16,000 garden birdwatchers, all collecting simple information on the birds using their gardens throughout the year. This information also enables us to find out how birds use different types of gardens and how this use varies across Britain and Ireland.*

*Garden BirdWatch is the largest year-round study of garden birds (and other garden wildlife) anywhere in the World. Membership of Garden BirdWatch costs just £15 a year. Being a member of Garden BirdWatch offers you:*

- The chance to find out more about the different birds that visit your garden.
- The opportunity to participate in an important national project and to contribute valuable information that can be used to help conserve the birds of Britain and Ireland.
- Access to expert advice to help you identify and look after the birds in your garden.
- A quarterly magazine on garden birds.



## Identifying Sparrowhawks

The Sparrowhawk is by far the most common bird of prey to be encountered within the garden environment. The two potential confusion species, Goshawk and Merlin, are virtually never encountered visiting gardens and can usually be discounted on this basis alone.

**General appearance:** A small, broad-winged raptor, showing a long tail and appearing small-headed. The upperparts are dark (sometimes with white patches present – see below) and the underparts finely barred. When perched, note the long, thin yellow legs.

**Adult male:** Smaller (wingspan 58-65cm). Has slate-grey upperparts and white/off-white underparts. The underparts show rufous barring, which varies in pattern and extent between individuals. Some individuals are evenly barred while others are almost completely rufous on the cheeks, throat and flanks.

**Adult female:** Larger (wingspan 68-77cm). Has brownish-grey upperparts, with off-white underparts with barring that is less rufous in tone. The rufous colouration seen in males is usually much-reduced in females. The white supercilium (the line above the eye) is more prominent in females than in males and a white patch is often evident at the back of the crown.

**Juveniles:** Young birds have dark brown upperparts and the barring on the dirty white underparts is coarser than seen in adults - sometimes appearing more like spots towards the top of the chest.

**Eye colour:** In Sparrowhawk, the iris colour changes with age. Brownish-black at hatching, the iris becomes pale lemon-yellow within a couple of months. As the birds age, the iris goes from yellow to orange and, in some adult males, wine red.

**Prey remains:** Sparrowhawks pluck the breast feathers from their prey, usually preferring to do this in cover or at a favoured plucking stool. However, you may find that they begin the process of plucking close to the site of the kill. This means that you may sometimes find prey remains or a scatter of feathers in your garden. To check if these remains are the result of Sparrowhawk activity (as opposed to a Cat or a Fox), look at the shafts of the larger feathers. Those plucked by a Sparrowhawk will have a split along the shaft (where the hawk's beak has grabbed the feather). Cats and Foxes bite off the feathers so the shaft will be incomplete, with a broken end.



Photographs by John Harding, Jill Pakenham, Steve Round, Paul Stancliffe, Mike Toms and Roy West.

## About the BTO – making your birdwatching count



The BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) is a partnership of birdwatchers and professional ornithologists, all keen to understand what is happening to birds within the United Kingdom. By supporting the Trust financially and by contributing to national surveys, members provide valuable information on Britain's birds and their habitats; research that forms a basis for sound conservation. Thousands of BTO members and other volunteer birdwatchers are involved in this monitoring work, coordinated by local organisers and scientists based in offices in Norfolk and Stirling. To learn more please visit the BTO website at [www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org), write to BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU, telephone 01842-750050 or email [info@bto.org](mailto:info@bto.org). Registered Charity No. 216652.



# Sparrowhawks and garden birds



**A BTO Garden BirdWatch Guide**

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