THE FOOD OF THE SPARROW-HAWK.

BY

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The menu of the Sparrow-Hawk (Accipiter n. nisus) covers a very wide range, although probably 98 per cent. of it consists of the flesh of birds. The other 2 per cent. consists of insects, mammals and carrion: by carrion I mean birds or mammals that the Sparrow-Hawk has found dead and not killed. Insects form a very small portion of the food supply, merely an occasional beetle; it is very rarely that insect remains are found in the pellets.

Mammals are eaten more frequently: rabbits, mice of various kinds, small rats, bats and more rarely a mole; whether Sparrow-Hawks kill moles or find them dead I cannot say. It is not uncommon to see moles above ground in very dry weather, or even at other times, so that a hawk might easily take one. On the other hand a dead mole is a common enough sight; this is especially the case when the skins are practically valueless, for then mole-trappers often throw the bodies away when they take them out of the traps. Bats are caught at twilight and are eaten very completely as far as I can see. On April 25th, 1932, at 8.30 p.m. (S.T.), three of us saw a male Sparrow-Hawk catch a pipistrelle within a few yards of us. The bat was hawking by the side of an orchard and the hawk came over it. The rush of the hawk took the bat by surprise and it dipped and so let the hawk get above it. Every turn and twist of the bat was followed with amazing speed by the hawk, which drove the bat down and down and at last took it about six inches from the ground. It flew with its prey into the orchard and ate it within 30 yards of us. Remains of the above-mentioned mammals may be occasionally seen at the feeding-places or found by breaking up the pellets.

Although Owls sometimes eat small frogs I have never known a Sparrow-Hawk do so. Neither have I any record of one eating earthworms, although they form quite a large percentage of the food of the Little Owl and figure in the menu of the Red-backed Shrike. Carrion figures more frequently in the bill of fare. I was very much surprised on one occasion to come on a Sparrow-Hawk feeding on the carcase of a full-grown rabbit that had been dead a considerable time. I came to the conclusion that Magpies had taken out the eyes and made a hole in the body and that the hawk had enlarged the hole. Later in the day I passed it again and
this time a Kestrel was feeding on the remains. Another time I surprised a female Sparrow-Hawk feeding on the remains of another hen that I had shot myself a day or two previously. Later in the day a Magpie was feeding on it; probably therefore in this case it was the Magpie's work which attracted the Sparrow-Hawk to the body. Keepers who use poison, and I am thankful to say that only a very few of those I meet do so, often make use of this habit of the Sparrow-Hawk of feeding on carrion to destroy it. As a rule the partly-plucked body of a Blackbird is placed amongst the loose feathers at some open spot frequented by the hawk or by a feeding-place. I had two skins, in my collection, of birds that keepers had destroyed in this way.

![Sparrow-Hawk: A hen carrying away remains of a Stock-Dove to drop it.](Photographed by J. H. Owen.)

Each winter for many years I have spent part of my holidays near Pembroke. Before the war the Sparrow-Hawk was quite a rare bird there. Now that many of the estates have been broken up it seems fairly common. There one may occasionally see a Sparrow-Hawk feeding on the remains of
a duck or wader that the shore shooter has neglected to gather. The duck may be one of many different species and the wader anything from a Dunlin to a Curlew. I have also seen one on an Oyster-Catcher. If the Sparrow-Hawk is not actually seen on the body great care must be taken in the diagnosis of what bird (or animal) has been making a meal. In that district there is a great variety of meat-eaters: Raven, Peregrine, Buzzard, Carrion-Crow, Magpie, Sparrow-Hawk, Kestrel, Merlin, and all the Gulls. I have seen a Great Black-backed Gull feeding on a Buzzard that some misguided person had shot, and a Lesser Black-back feeding on a Greater. Another day I saw a Black-headed Gull strip the breast off a Wigeon I had shot in less than two minutes.

A Sparrow-Hawk will certainly take the smallest bird for a meal, but I do not quite know what is the largest: probably a Grouse or Wood-Pigeon, although, as I have said in a previous article, I have seen them attack mature cock Pheasants.

What is the favourite food of the Sparrow-Hawk? That is a question that I have asked myself hundreds of times but found no answer to as yet. The fact that one has seen more of one species eaten than of another is no guide even if both are common. I think the Sparrow-Hawk is more or less content with what it can get most easily with a few exceptions: it does not appear to care for shiny birds. For example: when young Starlings are flying they figure very frequently on the bill of fare. On the other hand I have never seen old Starlings completely eaten, while I have more than once known a Sparrow-Hawk kill an old Starling and leave it untouched. I have never known one take an adult Magpie, a bird which is very common in parts near Felsted, although I have seen as many as four dead Jays on a nest together.

In the summer the common Warblers and the Tits are frequently taken, but the birds that are most often caught are those that make a habit of perching on outstanding twigs, or in conspicuous places. Hence Sparrows, Linnets, Greenfinches, Yellow-hammers, Chaffinches and young Starlings, are most liable to be taken. Larks were formerly taken very frequently but now not nearly so often. A few years ago the sides of the road were used by Larks for dust-bathing and frequent fatalities resulted, but the advent of tarred roads removed this danger.

In winter birds that move about in flocks are of course those that are most frequently caught. These are the same
as those that supply most victims in the summer, except Starlings, with the addition of Goldfinches, Redwings, Fieldfares, Golden Plover and Lapwings. The bigger the bird the less frequently is it taken. Flocks of Meadow-Pipits on migration sometimes come in for a good deal of trouble. Lesser Redpolls, Bramblings and other small birds that flock of course get molested, but one does not see them really often. Of the larger birds, Wood-Pigeons, Stock-Doves, Partridges and Lapwing seem to be taken most frequently. These are preyed on at all times of the year, but very many Pigeons are taken from the nests. Many Lapwings are also taken when they are actually nesting. If Sparrow-Hawks confined themselves to an occasional Partridge out of a covey the harm would not be very great. My experience, however, is that they do most harm to the Partridges when they have paired. Last year (1931) I must have seen a dozen eaten during April only and that, too, where stocks were rather less than moderate. In my opinion adult Sparrow-Hawks do not do a very great amount of harm to young wild game.

My own observations tend to show that it is young birds just learning to feed themselves that do most damage to Pheasants. They strike at the young birds when they are perching on the tops of the coops or when they first begin to climb up to roost in the trees. Once this habit is started it can become a very serious nuisance as the other birds are scared very badly. It is usually a young hen Sparrow-Hawk that does this.

Some birds show a penchant for a particular food. A year or two ago I had a drawer half full of wing and tail-feathers of Cuckoos eaten by one Sparrow-Hawk; for three years in early May that hawk fed several times on newly returned Cuckoos which had retired to the shelter of a wood for warmth.

I have records of Sparrow-Hawks eating several Great Spotted Woodpeckers, and more than one Lesser-Spotted.

I was very pleased on January 28th to find one eating a Little Owl quite close to Felsted School; I don't care how often that bird makes a meal if it keeps to the same diet.

Usually a Sparrow-Hawk beheads a bird first thing after killing it. The male does this practically always before bringing his capture for food for the nestlings, especially if he actually deposits it on the nest. Yet I have often noticed that when a nestling is old enough to feed itself the head is
Sparrow-Hawk: Sometimes they swallow quite large legs.

(Photographed by J. H. Owen.)

very often left until it has had all it wanted of the rest of the body. I have also seen old birds leave the head of quite a small bird until the end. If the Sparrow-Hawk is very hungry the whole head is eaten; if not, the bill is usually left. Very often the intestines are eaten first and then the breast. After that the legs and wings are picked. The amount of bones left depends on the hunger of the hawk. If a Sparrow-Hawk is disturbed from its prey it will often return to it, but the interval before the return may be a matter of hours.

When a Sparrow-Hawk makes a meal by the side of a hedge it is usual to find the remains of the carcase on the spot.
On the other hand anything left over, after a meal on the nest, is carried away to some distance and dropped. This is the rule until after the young can feed themselves, and then an accumulation of picked bones may be seen on or under the nest. Likewise at a regular feeding-place, although one may often find many feet and leg bones, wings and parts of heads, one rarely sees the bigger bones and I think these are carried away. From a hide I have watched Sparrow-Hawks swallow the legs of quite large birds and yet I can never find a pellet with a really large bone in it. There is therefore room for much investigation still in the manner of disposal of the food by Sparrow-Hawks. The pellets, when freshly thrown up, are nearly black and often moist. After a few days they become browner and firmer. In size they are usually small, about the size of the top joint of the little finger. It is quite unusual to see one more than an inch and a half in length.

I do not think a Sparrow-Hawk will eat eggs purposely. I have found eggs, whole and otherwise, at a feeding-place among the remains of the victims. I have also found egg-shells in pellets. My explanation is that if the egg was uncovered it was not eaten; the shells in the pellets were from eggs that were unwittingly swallowed as the hawk bolted the intestines.

I have never known a Sparrow-Hawk drink or seem to want to drink. More than once I have kept nestlings and adults in captivity. When I gave them water in a shallow bowl the only use I ever saw them make of it was for bathing. If there has been no rain for a few days in summer a Sparrow-Hawk will stop in the middle of a meal and hold its body with wings and tail spread to catch the rain if a shower comes on. I had exactly the same experience with Owls and Kestrels that I had as pets.

I append a list of birds I have found eaten by the Sparrow-Hawk, the chief sources of information being the hawks’ nests and feeding-places. This list seems enormous, but it must be borne in mind that a pair of Sparrow-Hawks during the year, counting the time they feed their young, need the equivalent of something like 2,000 small birds; also that I have been devoting a very great amount of time to the study of the Sparrow-Hawk since 1910 and have been very fortunate in my observations and the help I have had towards getting them.
BRITISH BIRDS.

A. Birds Caught and Eaten by Sparrow-Hawks.

20 or more times. Starling (immature), House-Sparrow, Hedge-Sparrow, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Linnet, Yellow Bunting, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Meadow-Pipit, Sky-Lark, Robin, Willow-Warbler, Whitethroat, Blackbird, Song-Thrush, Fieldfare, Stock-Dove, Wood-Pigeon, tame Pigeons, Lapwing, Golden Plover, Partridge (full grown), Partridge (young), Pheasant (young).

10 to 20 times. Jay, Starling (full plumage), Tree-Sparrow, Bullfinch, Long-tailed Tit, Wagtail, Lesser Whitethroat, Garden-Warbler, Blackcap, Mistle-Thrush, Redwing, Cuckoo (adult), Moorhen (full-grown).

2 to 10 times. Brambling, Siskin, Redpoll, Reed-Bunting, Tree-Pipit, Marsh-Tit, Coal-Tit, Flycatcher, Swallow, Martin, Cuckoo (immature), Green Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Teal, Turtle-Dove, Dunlin, Redshank, Snipe, Moorhen (in down), Coot (young)*.


B. Birds found dead and eaten by Sparrow-Hawks.

Sparrow-Hawk, Sheld-Duck, Mallard, Teal, Wigeon, Scaup, Pigeons, Golden Plover, Lapwing, Oyster-Catcher, Dunlin, Redshank, Curlew, Woodcock,† Snipe, Moorhen, Coot, Partridge.

* These were half-grown birds caught on the land by a small pond where they were hatched.

† This was shot at dusk and could not be found that night; next morning a Sparrow-Hawk was feeding on it. (Lamphey, Pembroke.)