

## Cooper's hawk, *Accipiter cooperii*

**Status:**

**State:** Endangered

**Federal:** Not listed

### Identification

On a cool fall day at Cape May Point, observers scan the skies as streams of accipiters zip past at tree-level. Darting through the cedars in pursuit of a yellow-rumped warbler is a Cooper's hawk, one of the three species of North American accipiters-hawks that prey chiefly on birds. The Cooper's hawk, as well as its cousins, the sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) and the northern goshawk (*A. gentilis*), are forest-nesting raptors that are able to quickly maneuver through dense cover while chasing prey.



hawk, one of North American accipiters-hawks that prey chiefly on birds. The Cooper's hawk, as well as its cousins, the sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) and the northern goshawk (*A. gentilis*), are forest-nesting raptors that are able to quickly maneuver through dense cover while chasing prey.

About the size of a crow, the Cooper's hawk has short, rounded wings and a long, narrow tail. When soaring, the head extends beyond the wrist, making it appear large-headed. In flight, the silhouette of a Cooper's hawk appears cross-shaped, whereas the similarly plumaged sharp-shinned hawk looks small-headed and T-shaped. Sharp-shinned hawks usually exhibit a shorter, more squared-off tail. In addition, the wing beats of the Cooper's hawk are stiffer and more powerful than the fluttery wing beats of the sharp-shinned hawk.

© B.K. Wheeler/ VIREO

The adult Cooper's hawk has a dark cap, blue-gray back, and rusty, barred underparts. The juvenile's back is brown with rufous (reddish brown) feather edges and sparse white spotting, and the underparts are light colored with brown vertical streaking on the breast. In all ages, the tail is usually rounded and has a white edge along the tip. Juveniles molt into adult plumage during their second year. Eye color changes from yellow-green in immature birds to dark orange or red in adults. Females are significantly larger than males. The call of the Cooper's hawk, which is often given during the breeding season, is a loud and nasal "cak-cak-cak."

### Habitat

During the breeding season, Cooper's hawks inhabit deciduous, coniferous, and mixed riparian or wetland forests. In southern New Jersey, breeding habitats include large, remote red maple (*Acer rubrum*) or black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*) swamps and, on occasion, Atlantic white cedar (*Chamaecyparis thyoides*) swamps. Within these sites, high-bush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) and greenbrier (*Smilax rotundifolia*) typically dominate the shrub layer. Adjacent upland pine or mixed pine/oak forests

provide an additional habitat buffer for nesting Cooper's hawks. In northern New Jersey, Cooper's hawks inhabit mixed riparian woodlands, eastern hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) / white pine (*Pinus strobus*) forests, and conifer plantations. Dominant tree species within such habitats may include red maple, sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*), eastern hemlock, white pine, black birch (*Betula lenta*), white oak (*Quercus alba*), scotch pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), and Norway spruce (*Picea abies*).

Cooper's hawk nest sites are often located within sub-climax forests that provide a closed canopy, moderate to heavy shrub cover, and trees more than 30 years old. Territories often contain forest edges and small openings along streams or roads, which may be used for hunting. In northern New Jersey, Cooper's hawk territories contained over 70% forested habitat within 0.3 km (0.2 miles) of nest sites and were, on average, 0.5 km (0.3 miles) away from the nearest house (Bosakowski et al. 1993). Home ranges of breeding Cooper's hawks in the United States may comprise 105 to 1,800 hectares (260 to 4,450 acres) (Johnsgard 1990, Rosenfield and Bielefeldt 1993).

During the 1970s, when the Cooper's hawk was first listed as an endangered species in New Jersey (1974), breeding was documented only within large, contiguous forests. As the Cooper's hawk population increased, pairs have nested in smaller woodlots containing mature trees and fragmented woods within agricultural, suburban, or urban landscapes. This may be attributed to both a larger breeding population and increased fragmentation of forested habitats. Cooper's hawks may exhibit limited tolerance for human disturbance and habitat fragmentation.

Cooper's hawks, which occur year-round in New Jersey, use many of the same habitats in winter as during the breeding season. However, because of limited prey availability during the winter months, habitat use during this season is less restrictive than during the breeding season. Consequently, Cooper's hawks forage within a variety of forest types as well as woodland edges. Wintering hawks may also frequent residential areas where they hunt songbirds and doves at bird feeders. Cedar forests, conifer groves, and other dense woods that provide protection from harsh weather are favored for roosting.

## **Status and Conservation**

Until the mid-1930s, many raptor species, including the Cooper's hawk, were shot in large numbers during migration and on their breeding grounds because of suspected poultry and game bird predation. Regardless, the Cooper's hawk remained a fairly common breeding species in New Jersey's forests until the 1950s when habitat loss caused population declines. In addition, the pesticide DDT impaired reproduction and contributed to population declines observed from the 1950s to 1970s. Due to the reduction in the state's breeding population and the loss of habitat, the Cooper's hawk was listed as an endangered species in New Jersey in 1974. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers the Cooper's hawk to be "apparently secure globally," yet "rare in the State (breeding)" (Office of Natural Lands Management 1998). Concern for this species is evident in nearby states, such as New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, where it is listed as threatened, and Massachusetts and New York, where it is considered a species of Special Concern. The National Audubon Society also included the Cooper's hawk on its Blue List of Imperiled Species from 1971 to 1982 and in 1986, the final year of the list.

Following the nationwide ban of DDT in 1972 and the reforestation of fallow lands throughout the state, Cooper's hawk populations began to recover. Cooper's hawks experienced increases in New Jersey Christmas Bird Counts from 1959 to 1988 and Breeding Bird Surveys from 1980 to 1999 (Sauer et al. 1996, Sauer et al. 2001). Other recent surveys have also shown a substantial increase in the breeding population of Cooper's hawks in New Jersey. As a result, the status of the Cooper's hawk was reclassified from endangered to threatened in New Jersey in 1999. The loss of large, contiguous forests remains a threat to this species and warrants the continued protection of Cooper's hawk nesting habitats.