

The short, blunt wings and long tail of the sparrowhawk, gives it the ability to fly fast through woodland, winding its way past tree trunks and through branches, ducking, diving, twisting and turning with incredible speed. It is with this skilful manoeuvrability that the hawk is able to catch birds smaller, lighter and quicker than itself. The hawk relies on the element of surprise to catch prey. It will often approach unsuspecting small birds from a low flight path, suddenly and acutely changing direction by flipping over a bush or hedge to surprise its startled quarry.

This avian predator is an opportunist, learning to rely on regular concentrations of birds, like flocks of starlings coming to roost, or more commonly garden bird feeding stations. Its efficiency at catching small birds, has brought it into conflict with garden bird lovers. The sparrowhawk has often been blamed for the widespread decline of songbirds, even though there is no scientific evidence to support this accusation. It is worth noting that most songbirds are predators too, but we don't get quite so worked up if we see a blue tit squashing a caterpillar in its beak, or a song thrush bashing a snail to bits.

The sparrowhawk will never overtake a flock of small birds to take the leaders. Instead, it is snatching those birds, which are old, diseased, or slow. This modus operandi ensures the genes of fitter, more alert individuals are passed on to future generations. Therefore the hawk is constantly fine-tuning the well-being of the prey species.

In addition to its supreme flying capabilities, it possesses another vital attribute, extreme patience. It cannot afford to attack the same location twice in a day, as it will have lost the element of surprise. So the bird sits and waits for long periods of time, conserving energy in readiness to launch itself into the attack mode.

The female is significantly larger than the male. This disparity in size enables the species to cover the entire range of woodland birds. Females can kill prey up to the size of a woodpigeon, while males seldom attempt to take anything larger than a blackbird. The greater size of the female enables her to carry extra body reserves needed for reproduction, and to go for several days without a meal, it does mean she is a less agile hunter than the male.

Today, there are 35,000 pairs of sparrowhawks in Britain, a small number when compared to its arch-rival the domestic cat, and there are 11,000,000 of those!

421 words

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