

SHARP-SHINNED VS. COOPER'S HAWK

Sharp-shinned Hawk

Cooper's Hawk

Similar in size to a jay or dove (avg. 10-14" long). Female is larger and can be as large as a male Cooper's Hawk.	Similar in size to a crow (avg.14-20" long). Male is smaller and can be as small as a female Sharp-shinned Hawk.
Tail typically has square tip , showing prominent corners. The outer tail feathers are usually the longest (or nearly so). Note: tail tip of soaring bird appears rounded.	Tail is usually rounded at the tip. The middle tail feathers are usually the longest. Note: When the bird is perched, the shorter feathers are often tucked inside of the longer feathers making them only visible from the front
Tail has narrow white tip.	Tail typically has clear white tip, although the white can wear off over time.
Head appears small compared to body.	Head appears large compared to body. The feathers on the back of the head are often raised, giving the bird a crested look.
Eyes appear to be close to half way between front and back of head.	Eyes appear to be close to the front of the head.
Broad chest and narrow hips. Center of gravity is often high.	Thick, tubular body with a lower center of gravity.
Thinner, pencil-like legs that can look long when compared to Cooper's.	Thicker, shorter looking legs compared to Sharp-shinned.
The feathers on the crown and the back of the neck are dark, giving the bird a "hooded" appearance. Note: This field mark applies to adult-plumaged birds only.	The feathers on the crown are darker than the feathers on the back of neck, giving the bird a "capped" appearance. Note: This field mark applies to adult-plumaged birds only.
Heavy, bold, reddish streaks on chest and belly. Note: This field mark applies to juvenile-plumaged birds only.	Thin, dark streaks mostly on upper breast; lower belly mostly white. Note: This field mark applies to juvenile-plumaged birds only.
When the bird is soaring, short rounded wings are pushed forward at the wrists so that the small head barely extends past the wings.	The large, angular head projects far beyond the wings when soaring, giving the bird a cross-like appearance.
Typically flies with several quick wingbeats followed by a short glide. The wing beats can be erratic and more difficult to count than for a Cooper's.	Often flies with slower wing beats followed by a short glide. The slower, regular wing beats are easily counted when the bird flies overhead.
Likes smaller birds like sparrows and finches	Likes larger birds like doves and quail

Information from Cornell Lab of Ornithology FeederWatch Program -

<http://feederwatch.org/learn/tricky-bird-ids/coopers-hawk-and-sharp-shinned-hawk/>

Other sources used as well.

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

There are lots of field marks to distinguish these hawks, although some are judgment calls (such as size) and some require a certain perspective (front or back of bird). The best way to distinguish Sharp-shinned from Cooper's hawks is to try to gather as many field marks as possible. Here are some key field marks to look for first:

- With all plumages, Cooper's Hawks are barrel shaped, with the width of the chest fairly close in size to the width of the hips and the largest portion of the chest about halfway down the body. Sharp-shinned Hawks, on the other hand, are widest at the shoulder and get distinctly narrower down to the hips.
- The size of the head relative to the body can be a reliable field mark. It isn't always easy to see, and hawks hold their heads in different positions that can affect how big the head looks, but usually a Sharp-shinned Hawk's head looks small, and a Cooper's Hawk's head looks large. Sharp-shinned Hawks appear short-necked; Cooper's Hawks appear tall.
- Cooper's Hawks are larger than Sharp-shinned Hawks, but size can be difficult to judge if you see the bird in isolation, and there is wide variability in size from one individual to the next and between larger females and smaller males in both species. Furthermore, large female Sharp-shinned Hawks can be nearly as large as small male Cooper's Hawks. Generally, however, size can be a reliable field mark, especially if the bird is very large or very small.
- Differences in leg size can be helpful for distinguishing between the hawks. Very thin legs are diagnostic for Sharp-shinned, and very thick legs are diagnostic for Cooper's Hawk. This field mark requires some judgment, though, and sometimes it is hard to tell if the legs are thick or thin.
- The rounded versus square tail is reliable if you can see all the tail feathers and they are held straight. The tail feathers of Sharp-shinned Hawks are the same length, whereas the outer tail feathers are shorter than the inner feathers on Cooper's Hawks. However, when seen from the back, if a Cooper's Hawk holds its tail tightly closed, the longer feathers can completely block the shorter feathers from view, making the tail look square. Furthermore, a Sharp-shinned Hawk's tail can look rounded if the feathers are spread. New feathers growing in can further complicate the issue.
- Determine if the hawk is an adult or a juvenile. Adult Sharp-shinned Hawks and Cooper's Hawks have dark gray backs, rusty-barring on the breast, and red eyes. Juvenile Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks have yellow eyes, dark vertical stripes on their breasts, and variable brown backs and heads with some white spots.
- If you can see the front of the hawk and it is a juvenile hawk, the thickness and color of vertical streaks is fairly reliable. There is some overlap between the species, but this is pretty unusual. Very thick, rufous stripes that extend down the lower belly are a good indication of Sharp-shinned Hawk, and very thin, dark streaks that fade away on the lower belly are a good indication of Cooper's Hawk.
- If you can see the back of the hawk, and it is an adult, then the color of the nape is a reliable field mark. Cooper's Hawks have a pale nape with a clear contrast to a dark cap. Juveniles of both species can show a pale nape, however.
- In flight, the birds can be especially challenging, but there are a couple of tips that could help. When soaring, the Sharp-shinned Hawk has short rounded wings are pushed forward at the wrists so that the small head barely extends past the wings. The large, angular head of the Cooper's Hawk, on the other hand, projects far beyond the wings when soaring, giving the bird a cross-like appearance. The Sharp-shinned Hawk typically flies with several quick wingbeats followed by a short glide. The wing beats can be erratic and more difficult to count than for a Cooper's, which often flies with slower wing beats followed by a short glide. The slower, regular wing beats are easily counted when a Cooper's Hawk flies overhead.