

# 3 Cooper's Hawk: from rare to abundant, a suburban success story?

By Robert Fisher

In 1978, the Cooper's Hawk was on the Illinois Endangered Species list. Today, it's hard to believe that fact, especially for those of us who feed birds in our yards, and watch Cooper's Hawks raid our feeders.

Is there a connection? I think so, and I wonder if their newfound abundance (relatively speaking; apex predators in the food chain are rarely abundant) is another one of those unintended consequences of human behavior and human alteration of the natural landscape.

Various North American databases deliver a mixed message. The Raptor Population Index doesn't refine its data to the state level, but the data for central North America suggests a flat population trend, neither up nor down. Cornell's Feederwatch data on the percentage of winter feeder watch locations visited by Coops in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky is constant until the late 1990s. After that a steady increase occurred. Specifically in Illinois, only 1 percent of feeders were haunted by Coops in the winter of 1991-92, the year that IOS began. That jumped to 8.5 percent 10 years later.

Those numbers represent wintering birds. What about the breeding population? Are there really a lot more breeding pairs here in Illinois today than there were 20 years ago? The Illinois Breeding Bird Atlas, conducted from 1986-1991, showed breeding Cooper's Hawks in the collar counties around Chicago, Vermillion County on the Indiana border, Rock Island and Jo Daviess on the Mississippi River, Winnebago, LaSalle, Poe and Union Counties. Most of the rest of the state had none. More recently, as chronicled in "Illinois Birds: A Century of Change," main author Jeffrey Walk noted the presence of summering (presumably breeding) Cooper's Hawks in the northern, central and southern regions of Illinois during the 2000s.

Examining historical Spring Count data might make the picture a little



Cooper's Hawk.

The Magic Hedge, Montrose, Cook County. May 2012.

Photo by Jerry Goldner.

clearer. The Spring Bird Count has now been conducted in most all of Illinois counties for 38 consecutive years, beginning in 1975. In 1979, five years after the SBC began, only eight counties reported seeing Cooper's Hawks. From 1975 through 1988, only 17 Coops on average were seen per year. Right around 1990, sightings began to steadily increase, so that in 2011 an all-time high of 325 Coops were seen across the state. To avoid getting emails pointing out that more birders are counting today, I did check out Coops/party hour, and the same substantial increase in numbers is confirmed, though at a slightly lower rate than is suggested by the number of birds observed statewide.

Another intriguing question: Is there a geographic or landscape use effect tied to this increase? The answer to the first part of this question is no. The north, central and southern regions (as defined on the IOS website) all showed increases in numbers. In 2011, 63 percent of the state's counties reported Cooper's Hawks during the SBC. But was the growth in numbers greater in urban/suburban counties with higher populations (and more bird feeders) than in rural counties? The data on this question is inconclusive. Bigger urban/suburban counties show a somewhat higher number of

Coops per party hour than the very small rural counties over the last 10 years, perhaps due to a simple fact: Fewer eyes out in the field on count day decreases the likelihood of seeing a Coop flying through or just over the trees of their preferred habitat. And in heavily agricultural rural counties with limited woodlands, this woodland specialist may be largely absent.

So what does it all mean? Cooper's Hawks are clearly more abundant summer residents and breeders than they were 30 years ago. Are they higher in numbers in Illinois than during pre-European settlement times? Maybe. Are we the cause, by concentrating their prey around our feeders? Maybe. A reliable food source may increase winter survival of hatch-year birds. And they're certainly less likely to be shot as pests than they were 50 or more years ago.

There may be unintended adverse consequences to their population gains. Some evidence exists of predation of American Kestrel, a raptor species in decline in the eastern United States. Some also wonder whether our declining Red-headed Woodpeckers might be another easy target. It will be interesting to see the status of this bird in the next 20 years and how it might affect the status of other birds of Illinois.

**Editor's Note:** *In addition to the reasons mentioned by Bob Fisher above regarding the rise in numbers of Cooper's Hawks in Illinois in the past 20 or 30 years, we must also consider the banning of DDT. When the bird was taken off the Illinois Endangered Species list in the late 1990s, the voting board said one reason the hawk was making a comeback was because DDT was banned in the 1970s. DDT interfered with how the predator's body produced calcium, causing egg shells to be very thin. The birds would sit on the eggs to incubate and the shells would break.*

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