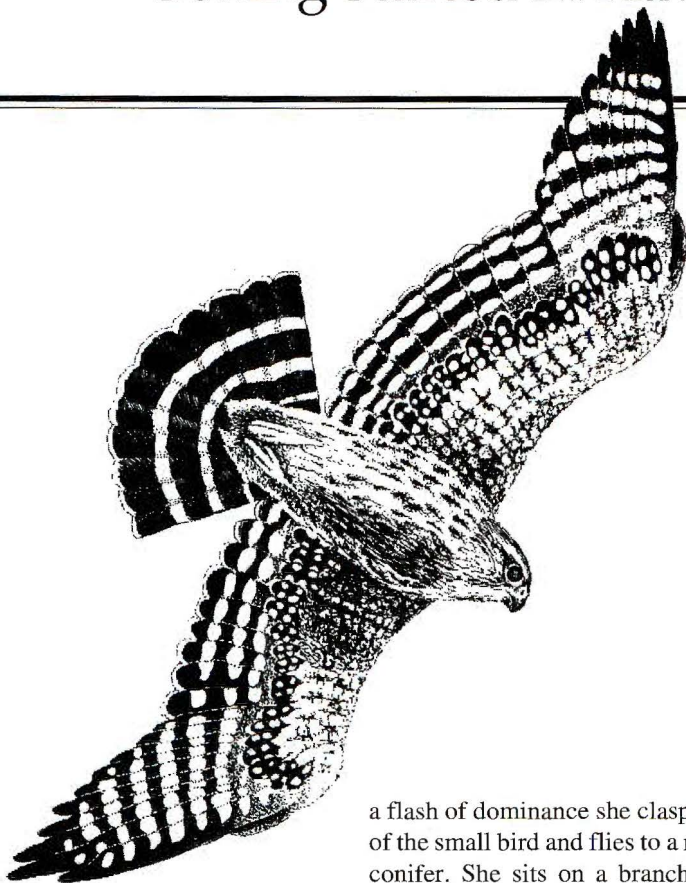


Struggling in the Wind: Getting Started in Hawkwatching

by Vic Berardi



Somewhere near East Troy, Wisconsin in the Kettle Moraine State Forest a small hawk not much bigger than a Blue Jay sits in a quiet woodland waiting for her next meal. She's a Sharp-shinned Hawk and this is what she does. She was born just a few months ago, but for the last couple of months her life has been nothing but chase, chase, chase, and usually she misses what she was chasing. But today, on a hazy Wednesday afternoon in mid-October, instinct along with hours of trial and error have improved her skills tremendously. She spots something and her chase begins. Weaving through the trees' branches, barely touching them, she narrows in on her meal. In

a flash of dominance she clasps hold of the small bird and flies to a nearby conifer. She sits on a branch well-hidden from view, and tears into a Yellow-rumped Warbler that was also born a few months ago, but didn't quite learn the game as well as others of this species that were already hundreds of miles south of here. While she is finishing her meal, she feels the warm southerly breeze slicing through the branches. She decides to rest a bit. A couple of hours later, but still well stuffed from her afternoon meal she senses something. The skies begin to turn gray and that warm southerly wind has slightly changed direction. She sits still and waits. Daylight turns into darkness, and off in the distance, bright flashes of light fill the sky and are followed by a deep rolling sound. When the light isn't flashing, it is pitch black. As she sits still, droplets

of water peck at her body. The droplets then stop and the deep rolling sound fades. She drifts into sleep.

The following morning, Thursday, she awakens to clear blue skies. The air is considerably cooler than yesterday. The Sharp-shinned Hawk ruffles her feathers. Something stirs in her. She turns her head to check the surroundings and in a burst of energy flies from a hidden branch to above the treetops. As she climbs, a push of cool air guides her. Warm air rises beneath her as she climbs to a thousand feet. When the air no longer lifts her, she glides. Around midday, the air lifts her to heights she has never reached in her short life. Even though her hunger for food grows stronger she remains on course. Others like her fly too. Occasionally something speeds below her at treetop level, most likely a Merlin. Well above her and moving a little slower are the bigger hawks her instinct tells her to avoid, but once in while she pesters them. The afternoon arrives; she sails on, over a gently rolling countryside dotted with small stands of oak trees. As she flies, the air force pushing her on gets stronger and chillier. Suddenly, she sees something ahead. It's huge, it's grayish blue, and it's totally uninviting! She drops down a little lower, but the warm air from below keeps lifting her higher. And at the same time the air is pushing her towards sure disaster. She is alone, and her life is at stake.

Above: Broad-winged Hawk drawing by Brian K. Willis.

At right: American Kestrel photo by Dennis Oehmke.