

Cooper's hawk

Accipiter cooperii

One of the most astounding sights on a walk along the Chicago River is the flash of feathers—that through-the-trees glimpse of a Cooper's hawk, one of Chicago's resident birds-of-prey. But don't look for them out in the open or soaring high above on the wind. This year-long resident is usually to be found perched on a branch or flying amongst the trees along the river in our forest preserves.

The Cooper's hawk is one of three North American species in the genus *Accipiter*, the “true hawks,” along with the smaller sharp-shinned hawk and the larger northern goshawk. The Cooper's hawk is our medium-sized accipiter.

Unlike the bigger birds-of-prey like eagles or osprey, accipiters aren't built for soaring high in the sky. Accipiters are built for stealth and hunting in the dense forest. Even amongst the accipiters there is specialization. The smaller sharp-shinned hawk preys exclusively on small birds, while the larger northern goshawk can eat mammals as large as rabbits and woodchucks. The medium-sized Cooper's Hawk will eat most any bird, but will also catch mammals, including chipmunks and squirrels, and even the occasional lizard or amphibian.

Cooper's hawks prefer to lay in wait, perched on a branch, looking for movement with their blood-red eyes, and then swooping in to catch their food with quickness and exceptional maneuverability. They have long, rudder-like tails which allows them to follow the twisting and turning escape flight of smaller birds and other animals they pursue. Rounded wings enable the hawk to generate a quick burst of speed, while short wing length allows it to slip through dense woodlands without crashing into branches, although this does happen.

As with most birds-of-prey, females are nearly a third larger than males. This allows a nesting pair to have a greater range of prey choices—smaller male hawks are better able to catch small prey, while the larger females can catch larger animals. The Cooper's hawk nests in a wide variety of woodlands, and are becoming more common in suburban areas. If you see a smaller hawk (with no obvious red tail) perched near your birdfeeder, it's probably a Cooper's hawk.

In general, Cooper's hawks are very shy. They are rarely seen, and except for migration season, stick mostly to the dense forested areas. During migration season, hawks from Canada “replace” those that have flown south for the winter, enabling you to observe them year-round. If you're lucky enough to see one flying among the branches, or lurking near your birdfeeder, savor the moment.

The Cooper's hawk serves a very important role in the Chicago's forest ecosystem. By doing their hunting up close and personal, they keep all the little woodland creatures on their toes. In so doing, they help ensure a healthy population of diverse songbirds and small mammals for the future—and that leads to a healthier river ecosystem.

