



Thorndon Birdlife

October 2025

Few birds inspire awe as often as birds of prey, those athletic aerial predators that rule the roost when it comes to avian food chains. People traverse cross-country to see clouds of Kites, or to catch a glimpse of a golden eagle in its highland home, and webcams fixed on the nest of ospreys, owls and peregrine falcons draw huge numbers of viewers every year. But you don't have to travel far to see many of our more common species. Some can be seen in parks and gardens or even found amongst the glass and steel of city centres.

Male



The sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) is one of our smallest birds of prey, the male being somewhere between a blackbird and a collared dove in size. The female is larger and can be up to 25% larger than males - the biggest size difference in any bird - up to the size of a feral pigeon. Sparrowhawks are excellent bird hunters, catching small species like finches, sparrows and tits; sometimes they ambush their prey from a perch, while other times they may fly low, suddenly changing direction to fool it.

Female



This fierce bird of prey is a woodland species, but will come into close contact with people when it visits garden bird feeders for an easy meal. Sparrowhawks are widespread across Britain and Ireland, with a population that has completely recovered from a deep decline caused by the use of organochlorine pesticides in the 1950s and 1960s, they avoid northern Scottish uplands and offshore islands. Elsewhere they are a common sight, even over towns, where their flapping flight interspersed with glides and classic raptor silhouette can be seen by eyes alert to the skies. Across lowland England, sparrowhawks prefer varied woodland landscapes and use hedges as cover for their dashing strikes to secure their small bird prey.

The Eurasian sparrowhawk can be found in any habitat and often hunts garden birds in towns and cities. Though it is a predator which specialises in catching woodland birds, only 10% of its hunting attacks are successful. Males tend to take smaller birds, including tits, finches and sparrows; females catch primarily thrushes and starlings but are capable of killing birds weighing 500g (18 oz) or more. I've seen them taking Wood pigeons in the garden.

The probability of a juvenile surviving its first year is 34%, with 69% of adults surviving from one year to the next. Mortality in young males is greater than that of young females and the typical lifespan is four years. This species is now one of the most common birds of prey in Europe, although the population crashed after the Second World War.

Organochlorine insecticides used to treat seeds before sowing built up in the bird population, and the concentrations in Eurasian sparrowhawks were enough to kill some outright and incapacitate others; affected birds laid eggs with fragile shells, which broke during incubation. However its population recovered after the chemicals were banned, and it is now relatively common, classified as being of least concern by Bird Life International.

Within the family Accipitridae, the Eurasian sparrowhawk is a member of the large genus *Accipiter*, which consists of small to medium-sized woodland hawks. Most of the old world members of the genus are called sparrowhawks or goshawks. The species' name dates back to the Middle English word *sperhawk* and Old English *spearhafoc*, a hawk which hunts sparrows. The Old Norse name for the Eurasian sparrowhawk, *sparrhaukr*, was thought to have been coined by Vikings who encountered falconry in England. English folk names for the Eurasian sparrowhawk include *blue hawk*, referring to the adult male's colouration, as well as *hedge hawk*, *spar hawk*, *spur hawk* and *stone falcon*.