

The Question of Hawks in Iowa.

By Philip A. Du Mont.

The office of the Iowa Fish and Game Commission has received numerous requests for information concerning the feeding habits of hawks, and their reputed destruction of game, song birds, or poultry. The question has been raised, too, regarding the apparent scarcity of all hawks and the reasons for this decrease. It has been noted that during the migration northward in the spring and again during duck-shooting time in the fall, when these birds are moving southward, that their numbers compare favorably with former years.

Occasionally during October, loose flocks of a hundred or more of these birds may be seen overhead drifting southward in large spirals. These hawks which are seen in the fall in Iowa are, to a great extent, birds which nested in Minnesota, the Dakotas, or the Provinces of Canada.

The Red-tailed Hawk is one of the hawks most frequently noted in these migratory flights, and it is to be found in Iowa in small numbers throughout the summer. Extensive studies of the feeding habits of this bird have been made and while it is found to take some poultry and game by far the greater part of its diet consists of ground squirrels, rats, mice, gophers, and snakes.

This so-called "hen-hawk" has come in for considerable persecution in Iowa primarily because it was a hawk, and a very large, sluggish bird which was found as a convenient target sitting in

the top of some dead tree. Many sportsmen, after killing one of these birds, have, upon cutting into the stomach, been extremely surprised at the contents which they found. This method of food analysis is entirely accurate, but tells no story usually as to the precise manner in which the prey was taken. For instance it is a known fact that Red-tailed Hawks are excellent scavengers and thus take rabbits that are killed on the highway, dead chickens which have been promiscuously thrown out in the fields or along the road, and even the heads of chickens which have been killed for use on the table.

Even though the Red-tailed Hawk as well as all species except the Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, and Goshawk, are protected under the game laws of Iowa, it is generally conceded that a "killer" which has once acquired the habit of taking game or poultry may well be eliminated. In fairness to the large number of these birds which are preponderantly beneficial the removing of these "killer" hawks should be limited to birds actually taking game or poultry.

It is generally admitted that one of the secondary factors responsible for the tremendous increase of grasshoppers and other insect pests is due to the reduction of hawks which prey upon this form of insect life.

The food habits and behavior of the Red-shouldered, Broad-winged, Swainson's, Ferruginous Rough-leg, and American Rough-leg Hawks is not dissimilar to that of the Eastern Red-tailed Hawk or its various varieties, the Western Red-tail, Harlan's, or Krider's Hawk. All are proven to be more beneficial than destructive in

their relation to the interests of mankind.

The little Sparrow Hawk, hardly larger than a Blue Jay, which is frequently seen poised in mid-air, with wings fluttering, watching for grasshoppers or mice on which to plunge, is also one of our most beneficial hawks. The Sparrow Hawk is a true Falcon. Two other representatives of the falcon group, somewhat rare in Iowa, are the Duck Hawk and Pigeon Hawk. These always may be distinguished from the Red-tailed group by the long tail, and narrow pointed wings and from the Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawk they may likewise be recognized because of the pointed wings.

Likewise the Marsh Hawk, in either the gray plumage of the adult male or the brown of the female or young, is a conspicuous long, narrow-winged and long, straight-tailed bird, always with a white patch of feathers at the base of its tail. It finds its food of rats and field mice by "beating" low over the meadow and marshes.

The small numbers of Bald-headed and Golden Eagles, Ospreys or Fish Hawks, and Turkey Vultures or Buzzards, that occur in Iowa are of such little consequence economically that they hardly need mention. All are protected in Iowa. The scavenger habits of the Buzzard and Bald-headed Eagle is well known, and the few fish secured by the Osprey during their migration across Iowa will not be missed.

The Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawk are of an entirely different nature. These birds are responsible for the greater share of the blame placed upon hawks in general for the destruction of wild game and poultry. These birds, generally known as "Blue Dart-

ers" have long tails similar to a falcon, but with rounded tips to the wings. Unlike the soaring habits of the Red-tailed Hawks these birds dash in through the trees and underbrush, catching their prey with considerable ease.

In the adult plumage both species have gray backs and barred under-parts, but the young birds are brown-backed with dark streaks below. The long legs, swift flight, long tail, and rounded wing tips should serve to identify these birds when seen in the woodlands. An effort should be made to reduce their numbers.

In early times hawks were held in high esteem. In fact, the art of falconry continues in Europe to this day. Few have actually seen a Duck Hawk strike a wild duck in mid-air. Yet the exhilaration of this unusual sight more than repays for the regrets of losing a duck. Unfortunately, of the many hawks killed in Iowa by farmers and hunters, few of these are the Sharp-shinned or Cooper's Hawk. Instead, the Red-tailed Hawk or its close allies are the ones generally shot because they are large and easy targets. But few of these birds are left to nest in Iowa; the bulk being killed during the fall when the migrant birds are moving southward.

There is a need for discrimination in the destruction of hawks in Iowa.