



## Audubon at Home in Northern Virginia

4022 Hummer Road, Annandale, VA 22003  
Phone: (703) 256-6895 • Fax: (703) 256-2060  
[www.audubonva.org](http://www.audubonva.org)



### Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*)

If your regular visitors at the feeder act nervous, are very still or staying under cover, an accipiter may be nearby. Able to twist and turn through vegetation with amazing agility, these hawks are predators *par excellence* of small birds. Cooper's hawk, and the smaller, look-alike sharp-shinned hawk are normally seen in Northern Virginia during the spring and fall migrations, but some stay over the winter and a few year-round. Their lightning attacks on the infirm or unwary offer a glimpse of the constant struggle for survival in the world of birds. This may be upsetting to those trying to attract songbirds, but hawks need our help as much as our backyard birds, if not more. A backyard or neighborhood that is natural and productive enough to interest this consummate raptor should be considered a mark of real conservation success.

#### What Cooper's Hawks Need

**Food:** This accipiter searches for small prey, particularly songbirds, but sometimes amphibians, reptiles and small mammals.

**Breeding:** Nests are built by early spring often near the edge of woods. The 2ft diameter nests are usually high up in the main branches of deciduous trees or against the trunks of conifers. Incubation of the 3-5 eggs lasts up to a month.

**Shelter:** Deciduous, coniferous or mixed woodlands with easy access to more open hunting areas are attractive habitats to Cooper's Hawks.

**Other:** Accipiters were among the species strongly affected by past inordinate use of pesticides, and have recovered rather well with better regulation of products and practices. This species can become fairly tame when provided a relatively quiet setting with a ready supply of small birds and convenient fences, posts and poles on which to perch.

#### Resources:

Native plants—available at Hyla Brook Farm, Nature by Design, Merrifield Garden Centers and other nurseries  
Bird food, feeders and anti-collision devices—available at local wild bird stores

#### Model Cooper's Hawk Habitats:

Reston Parkland—[www.reston.org](http://www.reston.org)

Prince William Forest Park—[www.nps.gov/prwi/](http://www.nps.gov/prwi/)

Rust Sanctuary—[www.audubonnaturalist.org/cgi-bin/mesh/sanctuaries/rust\\_va](http://www.audubonnaturalist.org/cgi-bin/mesh/sanctuaries/rust_va)

#### How You Can Help

- Create a bird-friendly environment with a diversity of native plants, shrubs and trees—offer shelter, nesting sites and a variety of berries, seeds, nuts and other natural foods for songbirds— as well as different types of bird feeders.
- Further encourage birds by keeping cats indoors.
- Adopt strategies discouraging collisions with windows (good for both predator and prey).
- Plant oaks, maples, ash, river birch, common hackberry, and white and Virginia pines to provide hawk nesting trees as well as food sources and shelter for songbirds.
- Leave small branches on the ground for the birds to collect as nesting material.
- Plant a grove of trees in one area, with understory shrubs to increase the structure and diversity, and create a more open area with low shrubs, such as American beautyberry, buttonbush, summersweet, black chokeberry and winterberry holly, or meadow wildflowers and grasses.
- Minimize your pesticide use to foster further improvement.
- The main thing is to be tolerant of this force of nature. If you're really worried about the little guys, provide "safe houses" of shrubbery or fallen branches to help even the odds a bit.

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