



## Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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**Etymology:** "Sharp-shinned" refers to the raised ridge on the inside front of the tarsus (not actually a "shin"). *Accipiter* is Latin for "bird of prey" probably derived from *accipere* "to take" or from the Greek *aci*, "swift" and *pteron*, "wing." *Striatus* is Latin for "striped," referring to the underparts of the immature bird.

**Description:** The Sharp-shinned Hawk, which is slightly larger than a blue jay, is the smallest member of the Accipiter Family, measuring 25-36 cm (10-14 in) in length. It has a slim body; short, broad wings rounded at the tips, ranging from 51-69 cm (20-27 in) when extended; and a long narrow, and usually notched or square-tipped tail. The adult plumage is dark slate-grey above with white underparts finely barred with red-brown. Its head is slate-grey down to the eye-line; white thinly streaked with brown below the eyeline; and red-brown cheeks. The tail has three or four bands of dark and light brown of equal width both above and below; white undertail coverts; and a narrow greyish-white tip (terminal band). The eyes of the adult Sharp-shinned Hawk are red and its long stick-like legs are a bright yellow. The sexes have similar plumage but the females are less bluish above, lighter below, and are noticeably larger than the males. The juveniles and immature adults have brown upperparts spotted with white. Underparts are white spotted with brown.

Sharp-shinned, or "Sharpie" has a distinctive flight pattern characterized by a series of steady rapid wingbeats followed by a short interval of gliding (e.g., Flap, Flap, Flap...Sail), and intermittent soaring, usually in small circles. It is buoyant in flight; uses its tail as a rudder to maneuver, and is capable of great bursts of speed to capture its prey.

The call of the Sharp-shinned Hawk is a series of very rapid cackles, given when the bird is alarmed. The common note sounds like a "kek, kek, kek" with a slight nasal quality, the male's voice being much weaker than the female's.

**Population Status:** The Sharp-shinned Hawk is listed as a Massachusetts Species of Special Concern. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Sharp-shinned Hawks were slaughtered in tremendous numbers by people who erroneously believed that this hawk affected songbird populations. When legal measures were implemented in the early 1900's to protect the Sharp-shinned Hawk, populations increased noticeably. However, when DDT and its associated pesticides were introduced into the environment in the 1950's, the pesticides accumulated in the Sharp-shinned's prey and were magnified through the food

## Sharp-shinned Hawk

*Accipiter striatus*

State Status: Special Concern

Federal Status: None



Above: Adult Sharp-shinned hawk.

Photo: U.S. Forest Service file photo from  
[http://www.fws.gov/yreka/northern\\_goshawk.html](http://www.fws.gov/yreka/northern_goshawk.html)

Below: Juvenile Sharp-shinned Hawk,

Photo: Trisha Shears from:  
[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Juvenile\\_SharpShinnedHawk.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Juvenile_SharpShinnedHawk.jpg)

chain; reproductive failure of predatory birds like the Sharp-shinned resulted. Eggs were destroyed as the shells became too thin to withstand incubation. By the late 1970's, Sharp-shinned Hawks appeared to have made a significant comeback from the nationwide decline. The population trend (in 2010) apparently continues slightly upward, probably because of otherwise lamented fragmentation of forest, and increase in forest openings.

**Management Recommendations:** At this time this species is not a priority for management, since landscape trends suit their habitat needs. Increasing suburbanization suits Sharp-shinned hawks. Their habitat is forests with clumps of evergreen trees for nesting interspersed with open areas (and bird feeders) for hunting.

**Similar species in Massachusetts:** The Sharp-shinned Hawk is almost identical in plumage to the Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*). The Sharp-shinned can be distinguished from the Cooper's Hawk by its smaller size, though the female Sharp-shinned is often equal in size to the male Cooper's Hawk; its buoyant flight; and by its square or slightly notched tail with a narrow greyish-white terminal band at the tip. The Cooper's Hawk has a rounded tail with a wide bright white terminal band at the tip; a large head; slower wingbeats appearing almost arthritic; and it generally soars more.

**Habitat in Massachusetts:** The Sharp-shinned Hawk prefers mixed woodlands and coniferous forests containing spruce, pine, or Atlantic white cedar with nearby open areas for hunting. Breeding habitat is usually near open areas and in the vicinity of water.

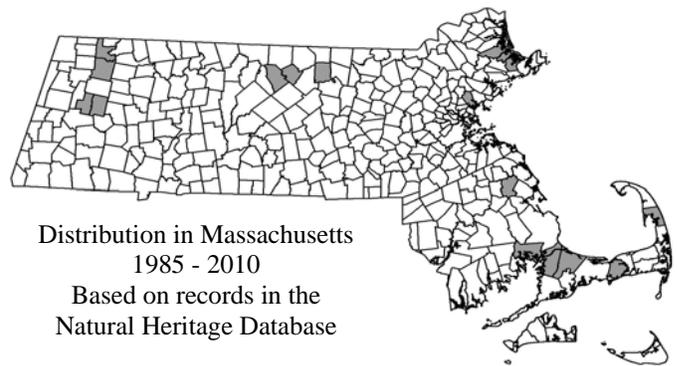
**Life Cycle/Behavior:** In Massachusetts, juvenile Sharp-shinned Hawks begin migrating south by late September with the adult birds following in October or early November. The spring flight to and through New England to their northern breeding grounds usually occurs in early April. Sharp-shinneds migrate by day. They hunt early in the day, travel during the warmer hours of rising air currents (thermals) and hunt again toward evening. Adult Sharp-shinneds tend to migrate inland while juveniles tend to follow the coast. They frequently travel in pairs or in groups. Courtship rituals take place over and between the branches of the trees as well as at significant heights above the canopy. Nesting pairs are solitary. Nests are placed in the denser portion of the lower canopy against the trunk or in a notch of the tree. The nests are up to 2 ft. in diameter and are generally well concealed. Nests are broad platforms built from sticks and sometimes strips of bark; moss, grass or leaves are rarely used. Both sexes gather nesting material, but the female does most or all of the building. Usually, a new nest is built yearly. Sharp-shinneds are not committed to a specific nesting territory from year to year, possibly as a result of their relatively short life expectancy (approx. 5 yrs.), the shifting abundance and scarcity of food, and competition with earlier nesting raptors, such as the Cooper's Hawk, for nesting sites.

The four to five eggs per clutch are bluish-white or greenish-white speckled with browns and lavender forming wreaths at either end. Incubation takes 35 days, with the young fledging 21 to 35 days later: usually the males leave first. Nestlings each

consume up to 3 small birds per day. The rearing of young coincides with an abundance of nestling small birds and young of small mammals that can be readily captured. The Sharpie nests later than the Cooper's Hawk and much later than the Goshawk, therefore lessening the competition for food. If the food supply is depleted, nestlings are fed such items as locust, cicadas, and large beetles. Nestlings are fed by both parents; usually one guards the nest while the other searches for food. Young continue their dependence on the adults up to six weeks after hatching. Families break up at the start of the fall migration.

Sharp-shinned Hawks hunt by perching inconspicuously on a branch and darting after their prey; gliding close to the ground; or by making low sallies from perch to perch on the chance that something will be flushed. The Sharpie's short broad wings and long narrow tail are well adapted for maneuverability when hunting in forested areas. It feeds primarily on small birds but occasionally preys on mice, shrews, bats, frogs, and large insects when birds are scarce. Females, due to their larger size, may take doves and quail. Mature birds require about 4 or 5 small birds per day. Fledged juveniles feed mostly on bird nestlings but have been observed trying unsuccessfully to prey on larger birds (such as pheasants) while still in the learning stages of hunting. When feeding, the Sharp-shinned Hawk devours the entire carcass, bones and all. As with all accipiters, the prey is squeezed, and the needle-sharp talons can penetrate and cause fatal damage. Its prey dies as a result of shock, suffocation, or penetration and is typically plucked before being eaten, usually at a favorite "plucking post."

**Range:** The breeding range of the Sharp shinned Hawk extends from Newfoundland west through Canada to northwestern Alaska. Less commonly, this species also breeds south to northern Florida, and west to west central California. Wintering quarters range from the southern United States to Panama and the Bahamas. Some northerly breeding populations winter north to central Michigan and Nova Scotia.



Original: 1994; Updated: 2010