

Sparrowhawk

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[Front view of bird of prey with barred underparts, yellow eyes and hooked bill](#)

A male Eurasian sparrowhawk

A female Eurasian sparrowhawk

Conservation status

[Least Concern](#) (IUCN 3.1)^[1]




Scientific classification

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Domain: [Eukaryota](#)
Kingdom: [Animalia](#)
Phylum: [Chordata](#)
Class: [Aves](#)
Order: [Accipitriformes](#)
Family: [Accipitridae](#)
Genus: [Accipiter](#)
Species: ***A. nisus***

Binomial name

Accipiter nisus
([Linnaeus, 1758](#))

 Breeding summer visitor
 Resident year-round
 Non-breeding winter visitor

Sparrowhawk eggs

The **sparrowhawk** (*Accipiter nisus*) is a small [bird of prey](#) in the family [Accipitridae](#). It has a wide distribution in [Eurasia](#) and north [Africa](#).

The adult male sparrowhawk has a blue-grey back and [wings](#). His chest and belly have thin orange stripes. Female and young sparrowhawks have brown backs and wings, with thin brown stripes. The female is up to 25% larger than the male. This is one of the biggest size differences in any bird species.

The sparrowhawk eats mostly small birds which live in [woodland](#). It can be seen in any [habitat](#) and often hunts birds in [town](#) and [city gardens](#). Male sparrowhawks eat smaller birds like [tits](#), [finches](#) and [sparrows](#). Females eat bigger birds like [thrushes](#) and [starlings](#). They can kill birds weighing more than 500 grams (18 oz).

The sparrowhawk is seen in [Europe](#), parts of [Asia](#) and parts of [Africa](#). Birds that [breed](#) in the north [migrate](#) south for winter. Birds that live further south stay there, or fly shorter distances.

Sparrowhawks build a [nest](#) in woodland. The nest is up to 60 cm (2.0 ft) wide and made from twigs. The female lays four or five [eggs](#) with pale blue shells. The [chicks hatch](#) after 33 days and leave the nest after another 24 to 28 days.

The proportion of young sparrowhawks which survive to one year old is 34%. More young males die than young females. 69% of adults survive from one year to the next. The [average lifespan](#) is four years.

The number of sparrowhawks decreased in Europe in the 1950s. [Chemicals](#) to kill unwanted [insects](#) ("pesticides") were put on [seeds](#) before they were planted. Small birds ate the seeds and then sparrowhawks ate the small birds. The amount of chemicals in the [food chain](#) increased. This affected the sparrowhawks. Some were poisoned and others laid eggs with shells that were too thin. The shells broke before the chicks hatched. The pesticides were banned and the sparrowhawk population increased again. It is now one of the commonest birds of prey in Europe.

The sparrowhawk's hunting behaviour means people who own [homing pigeons](#) or keep birds for food may dislike it. Some people also blame the sparrowhawk for decreases in the numbers of [smaller birds](#). Scientists have found that increased numbers of sparrowhawks did not reduce the numbers of birds living in [farmland](#) and [woodland](#) in the 1960s. Research in [Scotland](#) found that less than 1% of homing pigeons that died were killed by sparrowhawks.

People have used the Sparrowhawk for [falconry](#) (hunting using a bird of prey) for more than 500 years. It is difficult to train but brave. The sparrowhawk features in some old [German](#) myths. It is mentioned in a [play](#) by [William Shakespeare](#) and a [poem](#) by [Ted Hughes](#).

Description

[[change](#) | [change source](#)]

The sparrowhawk is a small bird of prey with short, broad wings and a long tail. These [adaptations](#) help it to fly between [trees](#). Females can be up to 25% larger than males^[2] and can be twice as heavy.^[2] When females are larger than males, it is called "reverse [sexual dimorphism](#)". It is unusual in higher [vertebrates](#) but typical in birds of prey.^[3]

The adult male is 29–34 cm (11–13 in) long from beak to tail, with a [wingspan](#) of 59–64 cm (23–25 in).^[2] He weighs 110–196 g (3.9–6.9 oz).^[4]^{p158} The male has a slate-grey back and wings (sometimes more blue). His chest and belly have thin red stripes but they can look orange from a distance. His [eyes](#) are orange-yellow or orange-red.

The yellow eye of this young male sparrowhawk (caught for [ringing](#)) may turn orange

[Claws](#) of Sparrowhawk

The female is much larger – 35–41 cm (14–16 in) long, with a wingspan of 67–80 cm (26–31 in).^[2] She weighs 185–342 g (6.5–12.1 oz).^[4] The female has dark brown or grey-brown back and wings, and brown stripes on her chest and belly. Her eyes are bright yellow to orange.

Young sparrowhawks have a brown back and wings, with rust-coloured edges to the [feathers](#). They have bigger brown stripes and spots on their chest and belly, and pale yellow eyes.

The Sparrowhawk's pale underparts and darker back and wings are an example of [countershading](#). This colouration counteracts the effect of light coming from above, and helps to make the bird less visible. In fact, countershading is seen in most animals,^[5] including the [Peregrine Falcon](#), the [Merlin](#) and other *Accipiters*. The Sparrowhawk's stripes are typical of markings on birds of prey which live in woodland.^[6]

Sparrowhawks fly in a pattern described as "flap-flap-glide". The glide means that the flight has an up-and-down pattern.^[7] In [Great Britain](#), Sparrowhawks living further north have longer wings than birds in the south.^[8] The sparrowhawk has a small, hooked beak. It is used for removing the feathers of its prey. The sparrowhawk's long legs and toes help it to catch and eat birds. Its middle toe is very long and is used to grab things.^[6]

Lifespan

[\[change\]](#) | [change source](#)

Most sparrowhawks live for about four years. 34% of young birds survive to be one year old. 69% of adults survive from one year to the next.^[2] The oldest known wild sparrowhawk lived for more than 20 years.^[9]

Young sparrowhawks (less than one year old) weigh less than adults. They are especially light in the two months after leaving the nest. There is probably a high death rate at this time, particularly for males.^[10] This may be because the smaller males catch smaller food. They cannot catch some of the bigger prey that females can. This means they need to eat more often. A female sparrowhawk of average weight can survive for seven days without eating. A male can survive only four days.^[11]

Taxonomy

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The sparrowhawk is part of the family [Accipitridae](#) and the [genus](#) *Accipiter*.^{[12][13]} Some [English](#) people used to call the sparrowhawk the blue hawk because of the male's colour. Other old names include spar hawk, spur hawk and stone falcon.^[14]

The [Swedish biologist](#) [Carolus Linnaeus](#) was the first person to describe the sparrowhawk. He called it *Falco nisus* in 1758.^[15] The [French naturalist](#) Mathurin Jacques Brisson moved it into the *Accipiter* genus in 1760.^[16]

The current [scientific name](#) comes from the [Latin](#) words *accipiter* (hawk) and *nisus* (the sparrowhawk).^[2]

The sparrowhawk forms a super[species](#) with the rufous-chested sparrowhawk of eastern and southern Africa, and possibly the Madagascar sparrowhawk.^[17] Eurasian sparrowhawks look slightly different in different parts of their range. Birds in the eastern part of the range are larger and paler.^[18] Six [subspecies](#) of sparrowhawk are generally recognised:^{[17][19]}

Notes

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1. [↑] [BirdLife International](#) (2016). "*Accipiter nisus*". *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*. **2016**: e.T22695624A93519953. Archived from [the original](#) on 2009-01-04. Retrieved 2010-03-04.
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11. [↑] Newton (1986) pp. 291–294

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15. [↑](#) [Linnaeus, C](#) (1758). *Systema naturae per regna tria naturae, secundum classes, ordines, genera, species, cum characteribus, differentiis, synonymis, locis. Tomus I. Editio decima, reformata*. Holmiae. (Laurentii Salvii). p. 92. "F. cera viridi, pedibus flavis, pectore albo fusco undularo, cauda fasciis nigricantibus."
16. [↑](#) (in French) Brisson, Mathurin Jacques (1760). *Ornithologie; ou, Méthode contenant la division des oiseaux en ordres, sections, genres, espèces & leurs variétés*. pp. 28, 310.
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19. [↑](#) del Hoyo *et al.* 1994. p. 158

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