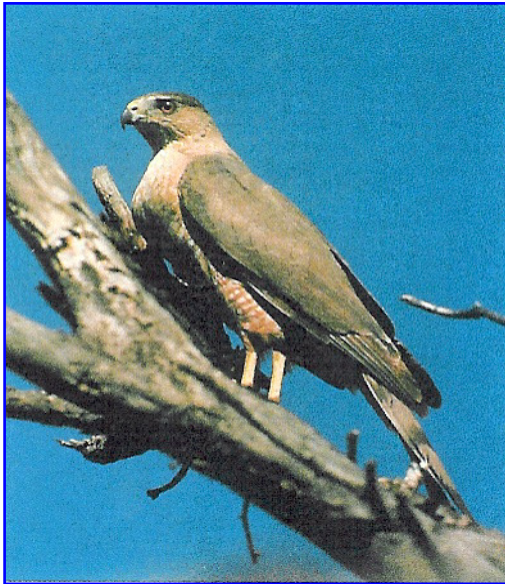




# Sensitive Species of the Santa Ana Watershed



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

The Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) is well adapted to its foraging strategy, the pursuit of birds on the wing. Its short, rounded wings and long tail give it the speed and maneuverability needed to capture prey in flight. Considered a woodland bird, it is now frequently encountered in urban settings. Historically, the Cooper's hawk earned the ire of poultry farmers because it preyed upon chickens (Bent 1938). These tenacious raptors capture a variety of prey from birds to small mammals, even reptiles and amphibians. Individuals hunt from the ground or in the air (Rosenfield and Bielefeldt 1993, dfg.ca.gov 2003)

The Cooper's hawk is a medium sized bird. As with all hawks, the male is smaller than the female. The body length of the male is 14 to 19 inches and that of the female is 17 to 20 inches. The adult Cooper's hawk has a dark crown that contrasts with a lighter nape, a blue gray back, rufous barred underparts, and a banded tail with a distinct white band at its tip which may wear off by the spring. Immature birds have a speckled brown back and dark,

streaked underparts. It is difficult to distinguish this bird from the nearly-identical but smaller sharp-shinned hawk, *Accipiter striatus*. Identification by behavior and size is sometimes possible. The Cooper's hawk will perch exposed. In urban settings, it is probably the Cooper's hawk that is harassing the birds at home bird feeders.

Males assume most of the territorial defense, but both the male and female direct threat postures, alarm calls, attacks, or chases at potential predators near their nest. Human intrusion can initiate this same behavior among some adults depending on stage of nesting and prior experience (Rosenfield and Bielefeldt 1993; Meng 1951).

### Habitat

The Cooper's hawk inhabits deciduous, evergreen, and mixed forests, as well as open woodland habitats such as woodlots, riparian and semiarid woodlands. They are found in habitats from sea level to above 9000 ft. However, they are willing to nest within relatively close contact to humans and occur within suburban areas.

### Status and Distribution

The Cooper's hawk is resident throughout most of its range from southern Canada to the mountains of central Mexico. It breeds throughout much of the United States, southern Canada, and northern Mexico.

The Multispecies Habitat Conservation Plan of Western Riverside County has identified several Core Areas where Cooper's Hawks reside: the Prado Basin/Santa Ana River, San Timoteo Canyon, Temescal Wash, Wasson Canyon, Slater Canyon, Santa Rosa Plateau West, Temecula Creek, Murrieta Creek, Tualota Creek, Vail Lake, Wilson Valley, San Bernardino National Forest, and Cleveland National Forest. Although the Cooper's hawk is mostly a year round resident of California, some Cooper's hawks of more northern parts of the country migrate into California and others within California living in areas of heavy snow will move down slope and south in autumn and return in spring (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Federal law now protects all raptors. The State of California lists the Cooper's hawk as a Species of Special Concern.

During winter bird surveys conducted at nine sites scattered throughout the Santa Ana River Watershed in 2003-2004, Cooper's Hawks were observed in all nine study sites: San Timoteo Canyon, 2 birds/100 acres; Mockingbird Canyon, 3/100 acres; San Jacinto, 1 visitor; Railroad Canyon, 1/100 acres; Temescal Canyon, 2/100 acres; Norco Burn on the mainstem of the Santa Ana River, 1/100 acres; Prado Burn, incidental sighting; Green River or upper portion of the Santa Ana Canyon (below Prado Dam), 2/100 acres; Featherly Park, 2/100 acres;

## **Threats**

The Cooper's hawk has few enemies, although ravens, northern goshawks, and great horned owls may kill nestlings and immature individuals (Bent 1937; Beebe 1974). Declines in the past few decades in the population of the Cooper's hawk in California can be attributed to habitat destruction; mainly the loss of lowland riparian areas, due to urbanization and other development. The destructive effects of human activities make identification and protection of suitable habitat extremely important in the conservation efforts for the Cooper's hawk (Grinnell and Miler 1994; Garrett and Dunn 1981). The Cooper's hawk provides a beneficial service in helping to maintain the balance in wild populations of birds and rodents.

## **Research and Management Needs**

Conservation strategies should focus on preservation of forested habitats, primarily riparian woodlands. Management strategies should be developed as a result of ongoing research aimed at understanding the Cooper's hawk and how to effectively foster a healthy southern California population. Because habitat is under constant threat, the status and distribution of this important raptor should be consistently monitored to document the effectiveness of current conservation policies and practices.

## **SAWA Contact**

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## **Picture**

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