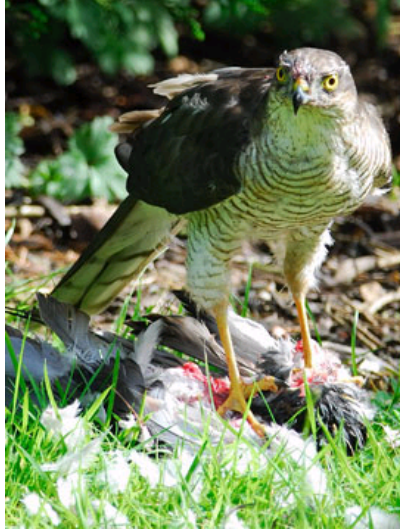


Sparrowhawk

Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) is the bird of prey most likely to be seen in the garden, but is less familiar to many than buzzard or kestrel.



Sparrowhawks are sometimes spotted as they try to catch small birds from the bird table, but their secretive behaviour means that they are not well known.

They are usually seen in flight. They fly fast with several wing beats followed by a glide, often close to the ground.

The Sparrowhawk has broad, rounded wings and a longish banded tail for manoeuvrability. The smaller male is blue-grey to slate above with reddish barring on body and wing coverts. The female is grey-brown above with brown barring below. She has a pale stripe above the eye, less obvious in the male. Young birds are browner than the adults.

Length: 28-38cm; wingspan: 55-70 cm

UK Status

40,000 pairs, stable; GREEN listed; resident

Population trends

Despite being heavily persecuted throughout the 19th century, its resilience and elusive nature allowed it to remain widely distributed though its numbers in the south-east and East Anglia were depressed.

It was in these areas that its populations increased in the first half of the 20th century. However its numbers crashed in the 1950s and '60s as it was seriously affected by persistent pesticides. Numbers were significantly reduced everywhere and it was virtually extinct in eastern and south-east England. Once the chemicals were withdrawn the species responded quickly. Numbers have been stable since the early 1990s, suggesting that most areas have now reached capacity.

Habitat and distribution

Typically a woodland bird but as it has increased it has colonised farmland with trees, copses and shelter belts and even suburban gardens. It is found throughout the UK except in the high Scottish mountains and treeless coasts, the Outer Hebrides and Shetland.

Breeding

The nest is made of loose twigs with a deep cup and is built in a fork of a tree often against the trunk, 6-12m from the ground. It prefers conifers if available. A new nest is built each year, sometimes on an old nest of a woodpigeon or other bird, often close to previous year's nest.

Feeding

Almost entirely birds, the species reflecting availability. In a study in south Scotland the most common species taken were chaffinch, thrushes, starling, robin, meadow pipit and woodpigeon. Males tended to take the smaller birds, while females took more thrushes and almost all the woodpigeons. They rely on surprise to catch their prey, which is often taken after a short flight from a perch or by flying low along a hedge or other cover.