

HELLO, HAWKS

■ Close encounters of the raptor kind

Much of Eastern Oregon and Washington is raptor country — wide open surround where red-tailed hawks, northern harriers and American kestrels maintain vigil over cultivated fields and bunch-grass slopes. On any given day you might spot the soaring flight, graceful glide, distinctive hover, or dive bomb of these noble birds as they hunt small mammals and birds. More often than not, I pause to watch and wonder what it would be like to fly.

Some of my encounters with hawks have been personal. I once scooped up a kestrel that fell into the Columbia River after it locked talons with a competitor and lost an aerial battle. The small hawk shivered in my grip to shake water from its plumage and took wing, no worse for wear.

A few years back, while casting for salmon on a rainy October afternoon, I heard a crash of wings in bulrushes that crowded the Yakima River shoreline and looked back to see a struggling northern harrier. Curiosity took me to its side. Had the bird been shot? Did it suffer from poison or some other malady? Ignoring all rules of what to do when you find injured or sick wildlife, I corralled the soaking wet bird, covered its head with a loose cloth to calm, and took it home. It spent the night resting warm and dry on a bath towel in a large cardboard box. The following morning I took the hawk out of the box and placed it on the lawn for inspection. To my surprise (and elation), it spread its wings and flew off.

I can't say every attempt to save a baby barn swallow that got bumped out of a mud nest before it fledged, or a robin that crashed into a picture window, turned out as well.

What keeps my attention during the dreary, fog-shrouded days of winter is a pair of sharp-shinned hawks or "sharpies" that hunt



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NATURAL
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near our suburban landscape. A shelterbelt of big sage, wild rose, and red bark dogwood provides a nighttime runway between a public golf course and our backyard for wandering skunk and porcupine. Two seed feeders, a pair of thistle socks, a suet feeder, a small fishpond, and the decaying fruit of crabapple, cherry, and mulberry trees attract a multitude of small passerine and resident songbirds. Mourning and ringed-neck doves are attracted to birdseed that spills to the ground. Before a nearby housing development crowded our view of Rattlesnake Mountain, up to 80 California quail roosted in the spruce tree next to the driveway. Simply put, the setting is an "eat all you want" buffet for a stealthy predator hawk.

Our sharpies plot their next move from the naked branches of a towering maple, gnarly-bark Italian plum, or thorny black locust tree. Sharpies have been described as "pursuit hunters." They appear as a blur of motion when they burst from cover to snatch a small bird. Their hapless prey is carried to a nearby perch or the ground for consumption, leaving only a pile of feathers as evidence of the carnivorous act.

Sharp-shinned hawks exhibit sexual dimorphism, a common trait for birds of prey. Females may be a third again larger (up to 15 inches body size) than males (10 to 11 inches). The disparity in size makes it difficult to tell the difference between a female Sharpie and the occasional Cooper's hawk that also shows up in our backyard. According to field guides, sharp-shinned hawks have a squared off tail while the tail of the larger Cooper's hawk is rounded. Sharpies also have a



Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

Juvenile Cooper's hawks (shown here) and sharp-shinned hawks are difficult to tell apart except by size.



Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

A pile of feathers provides stark evidence of a quick backyard kill by a sharp-shinned hawk.

smaller head. Good luck telling the difference though, when they fly by at a top speed of 60 mph.

The majority of plundering action takes place in a narrow corridor between the south side of our house and a trio of tall arborvitae. A window over the kitchen sink allows for furtive observation. Just the other day I looked out the window and wondered, why no six-pack of goldfinches hanging on the thistle sock? Why no squabble between juncos and white-crowned sparrows over sunflower seeds? That's when Nancy exclaimed, "A sharpie is on your Adirondack chair."

I sprinted to the living room to get my camera, but when I got within shooting range a naive sparrow flushed from the twisted honeysuckle vine that hangs over our back patio.



Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

An adult sharp-shinned hawk takes a break in a plum tree that supports two bird feeders.

In the blink of an eye, the sharpie took off and plucked it from the air. Given the large number of sparrows that hang around our back porch, it's unlikely the swift kill put a dent in their population. What the encounter provided though, was a classic example of how nature maintains a

balance between predator and prey.

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Winter fishing is a wholly different sort of experience

OK, I'm not a hard-core, dyed-in-the-wool ice fisherman. I'm a fair-weather ice fisherman. Well, I guess there's no such thing as a fair-weather fisherman or you'd never go ice fishing. It's always cold or there's no ice. Let me give you a couple of examples.

I used to have a few ice-fishing buddies who were a little warped. On the longest day of the year, they liked to go up to the mountains and ice fish all night. I just don't know if that sounded like a good time. Well, anyway, they talked me into going with them on New Year's Day.

A vendor had given me a big party tray. I thought I'd take it for snacks. One of the buddies had an ice-fishing hut that he was quite proud of. The rest of us were going to be sitting on five-gallon buckets.

As we were setting up, a big-time mountain wind gust

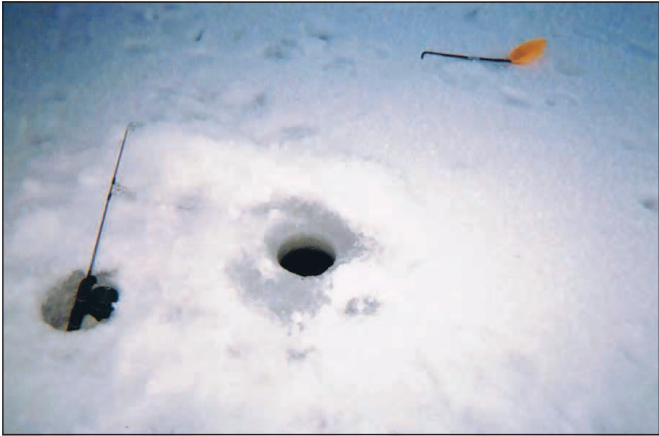


BASE CAMP

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hit. Buddy No. 1 was in his ice hut setting it up. When the gust hit, he went skidding across the ice. He was inside screaming for help. We all ran over and grabbed a corner of the hut and were able to slow it down.

In the meantime, all of our gear was blowing across the lake. Luckily there was a barbed wire fence on the other side of the lake which caught all of our gear. We got his hut staked down and then headed across the lake, picking up gear. All the way across there were little red frozen marbles. Finally I figured out. It was frozen little tomatoes off of my tray. You wouldn't believe how far the sausage slices had pinwheeled across the lake. And slices of cheese ended up in all kinds of random places.



Tom Claycomb/Contributed Photo

Drilling a small hole next to the fishing hole creates a spot to place the butt of the fishing rod.

We finally gathered all of our gear and got set up. After all of that excitement, I can't even remember how the fishing was.

Another unique trip. It was getting late in the season and warming up but a buddy talked me into going ice fishing. We hit a small reservoir which had some awesome bluegill fishing. The problem was, the snow had melted so

there was about half an inch of water on top of the ice. If a fish hit and all three of us ran over to check the rod the ice would start dipping down and consequently more water would run out of the hole so the water was now 2 inches deep. Only one of us at a time could go reel in a fish. Although the fishing was good, after a while we figured it was getting semi

unsafe. We had an eye for the obvious.

So now that I've painted such a pleasant picture of ice fishing, what gear will it take for you to get into it? Really it is quite simple to get into. To begin, you'll need an auger. You can buy a hand auger pretty cheap but if you really get into it you'll want a gas auger. To save someone from stepping in a hole we are limited to holes no larger than 12 inches in diameter.

For rods, tip-ups are the cheapest. Or they have miniature little rods that are something like 2 feet long. It's nice to have a V-shaped stick to set them in so you can see them tip over. Don't expect aggressive hits. If you get a little tap, start reeling. If you're not looking, you'll miss a hit.

To find the fish can be tough. I hate to, but following the crowds can be smart. Find out where the fish are in the water column. Usually

drop down to the bottom and then reel up a couple of feet. Start fishing at different depths until you locate them and then zero in.

Most people use little ice-fishing jigs tipped off with meal worms or worms. This winter I'm going to use some Pautzke Fire Gel which is a gel that has fish smell attractant. The longer I fish, the more stock I put in attractants. I'm also going to use some Pautzke Crappier Fireballs.

One other thing you'll need is an ice scoop to scoop ice crystals out of the hole after you drill it and to scoop out ice as it forms in the hole. Also, a big deal is a sled. I use the cheap little red kid's sled. With a sled you can throw all of your gear into a few five-gallon buckets and put in the sled. Tie a rope to the sled and then you can pull it across the lake.