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The Sky Island News

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"No living thing is ugly in this world."

Munia Khan

Thanks to my wonderful and creative daughter Kyla, Sky Island Tours has a new logo! After 20+ years it was time for a refresh and I LOVE what Kyla came up with. You may also notice that the newsletter has a new look. We hope you like the changes as Sky Island Tours forges ahead.

I would also like to extend a heartfelt THANK YOU to all who have donated to RKBearRescue. We have added Abba to Alfie and Abbie (I'm not sure what's up with all of the A names) to our pack. She is an absolute sweetheart. We thank Linda and Diane for their generous donations. They will help us support these wonderful dogs and find them a forever home. On behalf of RKBearRescue, thank you.

I hope you like this month's issue!

May Field Trip

Mount Lemmon Bear Wallow Birding. Thursday, May 21. 7:00 – 11AM.
Cost is \$10/person. Email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register. **LIMIT 15 PARTICIPANTS.**

Mount Lemmon offers excellent birding opportunities and cool temperatures. This month we strike out to Bear Wallow, where we will be searching for treasures like Red-faced Warbler, Short-tailed Hawk, Band-tailed Pigeon, and many others. We will meet in the McDonald's parking lot on the corner of Catalina Highway and Tanque Verde Road and carpool to the site. All vehicles will need a Coronado National Forest annual pass, an America the Beautiful Interagency Pass, or a day pass.

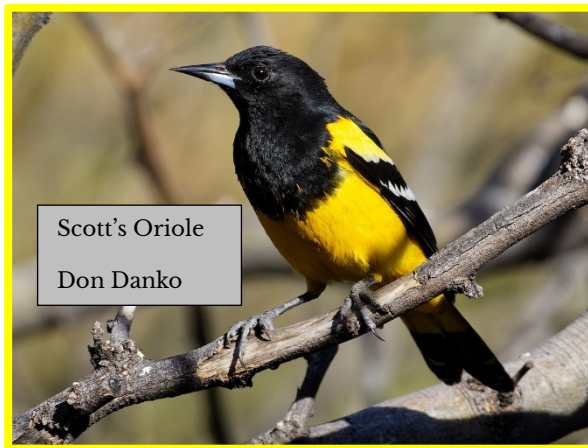


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May Classes

Ferns and their Allies. Thursday, May 15. 10AM-12PM. Virtual Class Via Zoom. Tucson Botanical Gardens. To register, use this link <https://tucsonbotanical.org/class-schedule/>. Part of TBG's Botanical Master class.

Ferns and their relatives were once the dominant land plants on Earth and they still form important components of ecosystems around the world. In this class we explore the diversity and natural history of ferns, horsetails, and other plants known collectively as pteridophytes.



Feathered Family Portrait: Orioles, Meadowlarks, and Allies. Friday, May 22. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Belltower Dr., in Green Valley). To register, call 648-7669 or visit <https://www.gvrec.org>.

The family that includes orioles, meadowlarks, cowbirds, and others is a diverse group that at first glance would not seem to have much in common.

Yet they are close relatives. This class explores the identification, natural history, and conservation of these frequently colorful birds.

Pima County Presentations

These online programs are free but you must register in order to receive the Zoom link to the presentation. The programs are recorded and all who have registered will receive the link to the recording. If you have questions or need assistance, contact us at: eeducation@pima.gov.

Visit our Eventbrite page at <https://bit.ly/Nature-Online-Tickets> to register. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

Lifestyles of the Smooth and Scaly: Snappers and Softshells. Monday, May 4. 7-8PM. Virtual Presentation via Zoom. Free, but registration is required.



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To register visit <https://bit.ly/Nature-Online-Tickets>. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

Snapping turtles and softshells are the largest freshwater turtles in North America. While not native to Arizona, they can be found in some urban parks in the state.

Adventures in Birding: Cactus Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. Tuesday, May 12. 7-8PM. Virtual Presentation via Zoom. Free, but registration is required. To register visit <https://bit.ly/Nature-Online-Tickets>. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

We kick off our celebration of the 25th Anniversary of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, with a look at one of the species covered, the Cactus Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl.

Order Up! Satyrs. Thursday, May 19. 7-8PM. Virtual Presentation Via Zoom. Free, but registration required. To register visit <https://bit.ly/Nature-Online-Tickets>. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

Satyrs are fascinating butterflies that lack the bright colors of many others. But there are many species, they can be found in a wide variety of habitats and have interesting habits. This month we explore the wonderful world of satyrs.



The World of Mammals: Sheep and Goats. Tuesday, May 26. 7-8PM. Virtual Presentation via Zoom. Free, but registration is required. To register visit <https://bit.ly/ticketsEE>. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

Perfectly at home on mountain precipices, wild sheep and goats are sure-footed mammals that are a wonder to behold. In this episode we explore the wild goats and

sheep of the world.



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Canyon Bat – North America’s Smallest Bat

Arizona is home to 29 species of bat. Most are insect eaters but 3 consume nectar and fruit. We have the largest bat in North America, Western Mastiff Bat, aka Greater Bonneted Bat, with a body length of 7 inches and a wingspan of 22 inches. The smallest North American bat also occurs in Arizona. This is the Canyon Bat (*Parastrellus hesperus*) formerly known as Western Pipistrelle (more on that later).

These diminutive mammals are a shade under 3 inches in body length. The wingspan averages about 8 inches. They are buffy in color with black ears and wings. A black mask crosses the face, giving Canyon Bats the look of a small, nocturnal flying bandit.



Canyon Bats are among the first bats to take flight each night. It is common to see them flying shortly right after sunset. They are occasionally observed flying well before sunset. Canyon Bats fly on broad wings with rounded tips, hallmarks of exceptional maneuverability. They can be seen foraging in close proximity to

vegetation, where they feed on small swarming insects like midges, mosquitoes, and moths. These types of prey are easily detected by the frequency modulated (FM) echolocation calls of Canyon Bats, which reach a peak frequency of about 45 kilohertz.

Unlike some bats, Canyon Bats do not form large colonies. The largest group so far discovered only numbered a dozen individuals. They can sometimes be found during the day in rock pockets or along washes where



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floods have eroded much of the soil leaving behind a caliche embankment. Canyon Bats have also been known to roost in mammal burrows.

Canyon Bats range across western North America from southern Washington to Utah, Colorado, and Texas, southward into Mexico. They are well adapted to arid landscapes of canyons, deserts, and scrublands.

Canyon Bats hibernate during the coldest part of the winter, emerging in early spring. In a cruel evolutionary prank, female Canyon Bats usually give birth to twins in June or July. The 2 young weigh roughly half of their mother's weight! The pups are capable of flight at about 1 month of age.

As mentioned above, Canyon Bat formerly went by the name Western Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus hesperus*). Similarly, eastern North America was home to Eastern Pipistrelle (*P. subflavus*). Pipistrelles are a group of over 30 species of small bats, all except the 2 North American species live in the Old World. But studies that began in the 1990s suggested that the Old World and New World pipistrelles were not close relatives. In 2006 a paper appeared in the *Journal of Mammalogy* that removed the American species from *Pipistrellus* and found that the 2 American species were not close relatives of each other. Thus, we now have Canyon Bat in the West, and Tricolored Bat (*Perimyotis subflavus*) in the East. These changes have been widely accepted by the scientific community.

Canyon Bats are often the most frequently detected bats on my Pima County Bat walks. Last week we detected them over 800 times in about 2 hours at El Rio Preserve in Marana! If you are outside during twilight, look for these bats. They are very likely nearby.

What's in a Name - Blackbirds

The Icteridae is a diverse lot including orioles, grackles, cowbirds, meadowlarks, and more. This family includes some of the most beautiful birds in the world. Some are somberly clad in black. Icterids like orioles and oropendolas build beautiful woven nests of plant fibers. Others make no nest at all, laying their eggs in the nests of other birds and having the host parents raise their young. The family includes seedeaters, insectivores, and



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some that take small vertebrates. It is hard to believe that all of this occurs in a single family!

The icterids are found only in the Americas – the 106 species ranging from Alaska and Canada to Tierra del Fuego. Included in this feathered hodgepodge are blackbirds, with 5 North American species so named. Despite sharing a name, the 3 genera of these birds are not necessarily close relatives.



Some of you have heard me lament on many occasions that the names humans have bestowed on plants and animals are often not good. But one we can celebrate is Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*). We nailed this one! All of the names of this bird reflect the bright yellow head

expressed by males. It was named, redundantly, by French ornithologist Charles Lucien Bonaparte in 1826 from birds collected in Nance County, Nebraska. This spectacular bird of prairie wetlands is most closely related to the Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*).

The genus *Euphagus* contains 2 species, both of which are widespread in North America. The generic name is Greek for ‘fine glutton,’ not exactly a positive moniker. I am not sure what American ornithologist John Cassin had in mind when he coined the name, but it might refer to the large flocks of these birds that can form around sites with abundant food, such as feed lots.

Rusty Blackbird (*E. carolinus*) is clearly named for the Carolinas. When the species was named in 1776 by German zoologist Phillipp Ludwig Statius Muller which of the Carolinas he intended was not specified. The holotype



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(the individual of the species that bears the name for all eternity) was labeled simply 'Carolinas.' Classified as Vulnerable by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Rusty Blackbird is a rare winter visitor to southeastern Arizona.

Far more common, both globally and in the Grand Canyon State, is Brewer's Blackbird (*E. cyanocephalus*). The specific epithet is from the Greek, meaning 'dark blue head.' If the light is right, these birds can certainly show a blue head, with green and purple gloss on their wings and back. But they often simply look black. The common name is for Thomas Mayo Brewer, an American ornithologist from Boston who battled Elliott Coues over the fate of the introduced House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*). For the record, Brewer defended the sparrows in what came to be known as The Sparrow War. Long before that sordid event, Brewer's Blackbird was described in 1829 by German zoologist Johann Wagler from birds collected in Oaxaca.

The 2 *Euphagus* are closest to Cuban Blackbird (*Ptiloxena atrovioacea*), one of several icterids endemic to West Indian islands.



One of the most studied birds in North America is the Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*). Described by Linnaeus in 1766 from birds collected in the Charleston, South Carolina region, this species surely ranks as one of the most familiar birds on the continent. The genus name is Greek for 'gregarious,' a fitting name to be sure. The

species name is also Greek for 'crimson,' a reference to the brilliant epaulettes worn by adult males.

It's close cousin is a California near endemic, Tricolored Blackbird (*A. tricolor*), with over 99% of the total population found in that state. The



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common and specific names refer to the bird's mostly black coloration, with red wing patch bordered below with white. John James Audubon named this endangered species in 1837 from birds collected in Santa Barbara. The species has suffered a population decline of over 95% from historical numbers due to changes in agricultural practices, habitat loss, and urbanization.

Agelaius is most closely related to the Jamaican Blackbird (*Nesopsar nigerrimus*), the only member of its genus. The Red-winged Blackbird's sister species is Red-shouldered Blackbird (*A. assimilis*) of Cuba. Tricolored is closest to this species pair. Notice that the 3 groups of blackbirds are not closely related.

If you are in North America when reading this there will be blackbirds nearby at some point in the year.

Spiny Softshells – Arizona's Flat Turtles

Arizona is home to only a few native aquatic turtles, mostly mud turtles in the Kinosternidae. However, there are a few introduced species that have been released, accidentally or purposefully, into the state's waters that have found things to their liking. One of these is the Spiny Softshell (*Apalone spinifera*). Softshell turtles (Trionychidae) number about 32 species in 13 genera, found in North America, Africa, and Asia. There are 3 species native to North America.



Native to the eastern and central US, Spiny Softshells are unique among Arizona's turtles in their flat carapace, the upper part of the shell, which is covered with skin, not scutes as in most other turtles. The front of the carapace has fleshy tubercles which are the origin of the species name. These

turtles are olive in color, some have dark blotches on the carapace, especially in



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young individuals. Females are significantly larger than males, attaining carapace lengths of up to 18 inches and weighs of up to 33 pounds.

These turtles have several modifications to the shell not present in other turtles. They lack peripheral bones, for example, which are present on the outer edge of the carapace in most turtles. As previously mentioned, the shell lacks the scutes present on the carapace of most other turtles. The plastron (the part of the shell on the underside of the body) is highly reduced in size compared to most other turtles.



The nostrils are long and snorkel-like. Softshells have long necks which enable them to reach the surface for air while keeping most of the body hidden in bottom sediments. The feet of softshells are heavily webbed. These adaptations indicate the highly aquatic lifestyles of these turtles. They will emerge

occasionally to bask but spend most of their submerged.

Spiny Softshells are highly predaceous, feeding on invertebrates like crayfish, snails, and insects, and vertebrates like fish, amphibians, and small mammals. While they don't have teeth, softshells have hard, sharp ridges in the jaws that can deliver a painful bite if carelessly handled. Softshells have a cranky disposition which, along with the capacity to deliver a nasty bite, means these animals are best appreciated from a distance.

The Spiny Softshell mating season in Arizona is April and May. Females lay clutches of up to 40 eggs in a shallow nest that she digs in the soil. Softshells are unusual among turtles and tortoises in that the sex determination of hatchlings is controlled by chromosomes not incubation temperature. Digging a nest and laying eggs is about the only time female softshells leave the water.



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These turtles were released into the Verde and other rivers in the late 1800s and early 1900s, apparently as a food source. Since then they have spread through irrigation canals and can now be found in ditches, ponds, and lakes across much of western, central, and southern Arizona. In the Tucson area, they can be occasionally seen at Agua Caliente Park.

Three species are found in the US, all in the genus *Apalone*, which comes from the Greek meaning 'soft' or 'tender.' The specific epithet of the Spiny Softshell translates as 'spine-bearing.' It was named in 1827 by French naturalist Charles Alexandre LeSueur.

Butterfly Profile: Red Satyr

Satyrans are butterflies that most people would consider to be on the drab side of the butterfly color spectrum. They are not flashy (for the most part), cloaked more often in brown, rust, and black with yellow highlights. But they are a fascinating bunch that can be found from high elevation conifer forests to oak woodlands and swamps. A common satyr of southern Arizona is Red Satyr (*Cissia rubricata*), which was formerly placed in *Megisto* until 2018.



This butterfly gets their name for the reddish flush on the upper side of all wings and under side of the forewings, creating contrast with the brown hindwing. The ground color of the wings is brown. Like many satyrans, this species has eyespots on the wings that are black and encircled by yellow. One eyespot is present on the upper side of both pairs of wings. Below the hindwing has 2 eyespots

whereas the forewing has 1.



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Satyr caterpillars feed mostly on grasses and other monocots, such as sedges and rushes. They are difficult to find on the food plants as they are green and are cryptically patterned. Female Red Satyrs lay eggs in the leaf litter near grasses of oak woodlands. Upon hatching the caterpillars set out to find the nearest food plant.

It is believed that only 1 brood is produced each year in most of Red Satyr's range in southeastern Arizona. However, it is thought that a second brood is produced in some areas in the fall. The flight season extends from May to November with peak abundance attained in early summer.

Satyrs get their name from Greek mythology. Satyrs were woodland spirits who represented wild side of life. They were often associated with drunkenness, lust, and primal Nature. Satyrs were often depicted as human in form with the horns, ears, and legs of a goat. What all that has to do with these butterflies, I have no idea (other than many satyrs do indeed live in woodlands). Many insect names derive from the mythologies of different parts of the world. The fact that some satyrs (the butterflies) live in the same habitat as satyrs (the mythological creatures) combined with the penchant to name many butterflies after such figures was all that was needed to make the connection.

Satyrs were formerly placed in their own family (Satyridae) but they are now classified in the brush-footed butterfly family (Nymphalidae). Red Satyr was described in 1871 by William Henry Edwards. They range from Arizona to extreme southern Kansas and Texas, south into Mexico.

On your next visit to oak woodlands, be on the lookout for Red Satyrs. Their flight style reminds me of a bouncing ball. Keep your eyes on them for when they land they look like dead oak leaves and are hard to spot!

Moth in the Spotlight

I fondly remember when I caught the wonderful chronic condition I call moth fever. It was on a field trip to Pena Blanca Canyon in Santa Cruz county. Noted moth-er Bruce Walsh of the University of Arizona was our host for a group of about 15 moth newbies. He had set up 2 sheets, each with a mercury vapor and ultraviolet light.



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That simple act opened up a world that I didn't know existed. Both sheets were covered with amazing creatures that were unfamiliar to me. There were beetles, wasps, and flies at the sheets. But most were moths. Glorious, beautiful moths! Moths of all shapes, sizes, and colors. It was simply fantastic! But one moth stood out. It was beautiful and unlike anything I had ever seen.

This was Hieroglyphic Moth (*Diphthera festiva*). After some taxonomic re-arranging, it is now placed in Nolidae and is the only member of the subfamily Diphtherinae. In other words, it is a special moth.



The forewings are orange and marked with metallic blue lines bordered with black. There are 3 rows of black spots in the forewing terminal region.



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The thorax has 3 black stripes. This combination of features is unique among North American moths.

The caterpillars feed on pyramid flower (*Melochia pyramidata*) and chocolate weed (*M. corchorifolia*), but will also consume clovers, mallows, and mimosas. Like its adult, Hieroglyphic Moth caterpillars are stunning creatures, with a black and white body and bright red head. The coloration suggests that it is chemically protected.

Hieroglyphic Moth ranges from southeastern Arizona and south Texas to Florida and North Carolina. It is uncommon in most of its range. In Arizona, records of adults span the period from July to September. Arizona records are from Pima, Santa Cruz, and Cochise Counties according to the Moth Photographers Group website.

I have not observed Hieroglyphic Moths very often since that initial fantastic encounter. But every time I set up a sheet during monsoon season, I am always hopeful that one will appear and renew our acquaintance.

Book Review Grasshoppers, Locusts, and Crickets of the World. Martin Husemann and Oliver Hawlitschek, eds. 318 pages. Princeton. 2026.

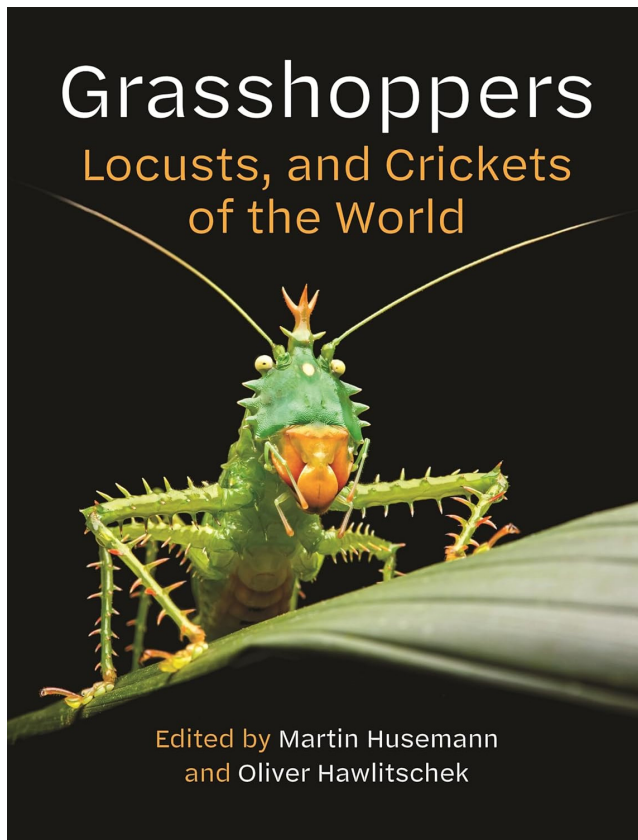
Grasshoppers, crickets, katydids, and their relatives comprise the order Orthoptera, a worldwide group that includes about 30,000 species (and counting). They are a wonderfully diverse group that have fantastic shapes, beautiful colors, and fascinating life histories that, in my opinion, deserve more attention from naturalists. The publication of this new book will certainly help to shine the spotlight on the world's orthopterans.

While similar to other volumes in the '... of the World' series, this book does things somewhat differently. Instead of an introduction that discusses the biology of the group in question, followed by accounts of families, this one is divided into 8 chapters. The chapters are Evolution and Systematics, Biology and Ecology, Pests, The Diversity of Orthoptera Around the World, Research and Resources, Conservation, and Cultural Aspects. Collectively, they provide a well-rounded overview of the natural and human history of these insects.



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Each chapter is divided into small sections that focus on a particular aspect of the topic under examination. The number of sections varies from 1 (Pests) to 29 (The Diversity of Orthoptera Around the World), with most chapters in the 5 -7 range. The sections bear titles such as 'Raspy Crickets as Pollinators of Orchids,' 'Big and Showy, but Poorly Known Mexican Orthoptera,' and 'The Rocky Mountain Locust: From Magnificent Profusion to Mysterious Extinction.' A wide range of natural history information is provided in these pages, all of it fascinating.



Another part of this book that differs from others in the series is that it is not written by 1 or 2 people. Instead, each section is written by scientists with expert knowledge of the topic. Over 70 orthopterists have contributed to the book, coming from all over the world, bringing a huge range of research interests and experiences. Each other brings extensive knowledge about the local orthopterans that he or she has studied, which adds depth to the subject that only those with local knowledge can bring.

Like other titles in the series, one of the many strengths of the book are the fantastic photographs that grace it's pages. The images beautifully depict the amazing colors, striking patterns, and diverse shapes that the world's

orthopterans possess. These insects are wildly spectacular!

In short, this is a great addition to any entomologist's library. It is also a fascinating and beautiful introduction to a diverse collection of insects.

New Species Report

Sometimes things just drop in your lap. Fate hands you a gift out of nowhere. Here you go. You're welcome. Such was the case with this column. One day a note came across my eyes that a new species of termite had been discovered that took its name from a legendary fictional character.



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I know that termites do not rank high on most people's favorite animals list. In fact, they are probably near the bottom of such a list. But termites play an important role in many ecosystems, recycling nutrients locked up in wood and other plant parts, making them available to other organisms. It is not sexy work, but it is important work.

Entomologists from the University of Florida were conducting fieldwork in French Guiana when they discovered the new drywoods termite in a standing dead tree in the rainforest.



Like many other termites, the new species has a creamy buff body with a black head. The distinctive feature is not the color of the head, but its shape. It looks like the head of a sperm whale. As in its namesake, the termite's mandibles are largely hidden from above.

In honor of the likeness of the insect to the whale, the entomologists named it after Moby Dick from Herman Melville's novel. The name of the new termite is *Cryptotermes mobydicki*.

Unlike Arizona termites, which live in nests underground, the new species is like many tropical species and place their nests in the trees. They pose no risk to human habitations.

This is an example of life imitating art imitating life!

Did you know?

... that backyard community scientists have helped ornithologists reveal what hawks are eating? A team from the University of Kentucky reviewed almost 75,000 photographs of Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks posted to iNaturalist by community scientists and identified thousands of predation events. What did they uncover? Cooper's Hawks preferred birds but ate



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more mammals than Sharp-shinned Hawks. Rock Dove, Mourning Dove, and other dove species were selected by Cooper's more than expected based on availability. Sharpies were bird specialists and also ate Mourning Doves but showed a preference for European Starlings. This is another example of how iNaturalist and other community science platforms are being used by researchers.

Perhaps your own observations were part of the study!



Sharp-shinned Hawk with White-breasted Nuthatch. Photo by Santa Andujar.