

Goshawk *Accipiter gentiles*

Below is a brief outline of one persons' experience during the 2004 display season in the BOG area. There are also some of the identification features that I find useful when separating Goshawks from other species of raptor. The site names have not been mentioned, as this species is known to suffer from persecution as well as from rouge falconers and egg collectors. If seen well Goshawk is not that hard to identify but often views are distant and/or brief and it is then that confusion with other species can occur. Although it is a very scarce bird in the BOG area, patience will almost certainly reward observers as birds do occur regularly in small numbers in the display period of January to April. Outside this period it is often notable by its absence although birds can be recorded in any month of the year. To encounter this species locally there is no magic solution other than multiple hours in the field, lots of practice and a thorough acquaintance with all the commoner species of raptors.

2004 observations

26th and 29th February – sat out at site 1

1st, 6th and 14th March – site 2

9th March – male sat out and very brief displaying site 3

18th March – male displaying briefly at site 3

22nd March – pair displaying at site 3– note a good day for raptors

25th March – female mobbed by 2 crows site 3

25th March – adult bird with Peregrine at site 4

27th March – one sat out at site 3

6th April – pair displaying over site 4

12th April – probable male briefly at site 3

Although this year has been good for quality of sightings, there have still been far too many site visits and hours in the field with no activity, suggests that our population is still perilously low. Pairs together have been encouraging and this very slight up-turn in sightings has been mirrored by other observers such as KM and AGG at other locations inside the BOG area. Judging by the speed birds can cover huge distances, it would not be surprising if we have just a handful of birds that range throughout the BOG area and probably well outside the confines of the BOG area as well. It is quite possible that the population is kept so low that breeding is not even attempted in our area on an annual basis, if at all.

As the recording area boasts much suitable habitat and has an abundance of all the main prey items, most notably pigeons, corvids, grey squirrel, rabbit and game birds, one must arrive at the conclusion that other limiting factors are suppressing the local population which is no higher now than it was 30 years ago when Goshawk was a national rarity.

Overall impression is always chunkier and more robust than any Sparrowhawk. Everything about Goshawk appears more thick-set, giving a more powerful look and flight. Many times the first impression before viewed with the bins has been of a harrier sp, and sometimes even of Buzzard or Peregrine with, in fact, Sparrowhawk being relatively rarely thought of when faced with a "Gos", particularly so with females. Everything about Goshawk oozes power and the bird seems to have a real purpose about its movements and a "don't mess with me" attitude towards its flight but on the other hand, particularly in level flight can still give off the impression of being laid back and relaxed, with deep, languid and powerful wing-beats, interspersed with a glide which cruises on the level and does not lose height towards the end. Goshawk is like a perfectly toned rugby league player possessing power, speed and agility, whereas Common Buzzard is like a bloke who needs to cut down on the pies but is probably a decent laugh down the pub, while Hen Harrier lies somewhere

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in between, often seeming flimsy in comparison to Goshawk. The attitude that Goshawk seems to portray is that of a bird mooching around with determination and prowess as well as arrogance as if advertising that they are the top predator.

This year a female was noted being frantically mobbed by two Carrion Crows at site 3 and absolutely dwarfed them. Also at this site a pair was observed circling and displaying at fairly close range. A pair of Buzzards were noted making a beeline for them, to mob them – the male goshawk seemed completely uninterested being neither intimidated or aggressive where in contrast the female turned on the Buzzards and singled out one in particular, actually pecking it and striking it with its talons while driving them off in the direction they had come. This scenario was repeated at nearby site 4 and the aggressive behaviour was useful for size comparison with the Buzzards. The wing-length looked to be about equal between the female Goshawk and the Buzzard nearest to it but the wing-bulk was less than Buzzard due to the more tapering hand of the Goshawk.

On another occasion an adult goshawk was interplaying with an adult Peregrine at site 4 and while the sex of both birds was not determined it was apparent that the goshawk showed considerable bulk and size compared to the Peregrine as well as showing a fuller, parallel tail shape and more prominent head as well as lacking the Peregrines straighter rear edge to the wing.

Body is fuller and longer in contrast to Sparrowhawk with an evenly bulging, fat belly and chunky, relatively long under-tail covert area. This latter feature I have noticed to be quite pronounced on birds which are known to be definite females. Sparrowhawks can show a bulging chest but this is not as even as it is on Goshawk and looks more like a lump in the throat – probably due to a full crop. Goshawks tend to be barrel-chested. Its hard to put into words but the whole profile seems to be an even curve from bill right through the body and under-tail coverts and extending into the tail to give the tail depth. Compared with Hen Harrier the body has more depth and substance and appears more muscular, while Common Buzzard just looks chubby in comparisons.

The Wings appear longer and more “pulled-out” than on Sparrowhawk and seem broad and more parallel with a tapering wingtip. In some attitudes can recall Peregrine. The relatively longer, more tapering wing, particularly of the female can recall ringtail harrier. Sparrowhawk looks shorter in the hand and sometimes appears like a fan on the wingtip, almost like it is an arm with fingers on it, with no length at all to the hand. The overall wing-shape and structure is useful and not just the bulging secondaries so often raved about in books that can also be shown on Sparrowhawk, particularly females. When viewing soaring Goshawks the secondaries can be very noticeably bulging – again, like most of the pro-gos features this seems to be more apparent on birds which are known to be females.

Head - The protruding head is another feature I feel is more pronounced on definite females and a little reminiscent of Honey Buzzard. In comparison to Sparrowhawk the head seems like a turtles extended fully and pulled-out whereas that of Sparrowhawk seems to be just “peeping” out from the body. In some attitudes/angles this feature is not always easy to see

Tail - chunkier and more parallel looking, being broad at the base without the pinched-in effect shown on Sparrowhawk. From a side profile the tail always appears thick-set whereas Sparrowhawks seems paper-thin and very flimsy. This solid looking, relatively long, parallel tail added to the longer under-tail coverts gives quite a distinctive rear end. Again in females the tail seems longer in relation to the rest of the bird and seems a little like a stocky harrier.

The corners appear to have lumpy blobs on them lacking the square-cut corners of Sparrowhawk. Doesn't appear to soar with wings raised, with wings seemingly held flat. When soaring I feel that again the longer hand allows comparison with the Sparrowhawks short, stumpy rounded wings (even more so on males). The profile of the tail is also thick set and chunky looking, with this being seen right down to the tail tip whereas Sparrowhawk appears paper-thin viewed side-on. In fact the whole bulkiness on Goshawk stretches evenly from chin to tail tip, with maybe a more pronounced squashed-up feel to the body on males which may be emphasised by the longer tail and head projection of females. Again, compared to Hen Harrier the tail is fuller, has more depth and lacks the flimsy, teetering nature of the harriers' tail.

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Flight always appears powerful and purposeful than Sparrowhawk. Each wing-beat seems to have more “meaning” behind it and when flapping between bouts of soaring seems slightly slower and fuller whereas Sparrowhawk seems flickery and panicky. If compared with Sparrowhawks on the same day, at the same site and thus in the same weather conditions it can be noticed that Goshawk has a wider turning circle than Sparrowhawk but this like some of the other features are best used in conjunction with other features as when they are added together they form a distinctive picture of Goshawk whereas used in isolation may only arouse suspicion that Goshawk is present. When pursuing prey the wing-beats are quicker than in normal flight but still appear deep and purposeful and never have that dithering and highy-strung feel to them like Sparrowhawks’ do. When soaring Goshawks tend to hold their wings flat but on distant birds this can be hard to ascertain.

Flap and glide flight is purposeful with a few stiff wing-beats interspersed with a glide on flat wings with carpal pointed slightly forward. Sometimes in this flight they can droop their wings, for example, when mooching about low of the woodland.

Plumage – Can look to have a hooded appearance and can appear strikingly white below and anything from brownish-grey to mid-brown above. Definite females appear to be on the browner end of the scale. When perched and seen well the body seems very white broken by black pencil thin bars. The bird noted sat out at site 1 was very “black and white” with the underparts appearing pure, pristine white (distance meant that the barring could not be seen) and upperparts appearing almost blackish. Clear-cut white supercillium was obvious as was the reddish colour of its eye as it caught the sun. The site 2 bird didn’t seem to have a strong “super”, this being confirmed by Keith Moir who watches there more often.

Pellets were found at site 2. Neville Bowland analysed them and the findings were that they contained large bird bones and rabbit and were said to almost certainly be Goshawk. Pellets were also obtained from under the tree where a Goshawk sat out at site 1 and these showed similar contents.

Andy Jowett