

Looking for the Goshawk

By Conor Mark Jameson. 2013. Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 385 Broadway, New York, NY, USA, 10018. 368 pages, 18.99 GBP, Cloth.

I opened this book with some trepidation. Many books on a single species are written by scientists who have spent years collecting a mountain of minute details. These they pour into the book, turning it into a dry read. I usually wish they had put more effort into an interpreted summary. This book is not like that at all.

Instead this is about a passion for one species, the Goshawk in the United Kingdom. This passion takes in everything that relates to this predator – literature, art, taxidermy, falconry, habitat and, of course, the bird itself. It equates to me having an infatuation with Ross's Gull in Canada (our gull population is about 100 pairs while the UK Goshawk numbers about 400).

Conor Mark Jameson is the author of many books and scripts. He is a columnist and writer for nature magazines and has worked in conservation for many years. He is stationed at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' headquarters in Sandy, Bedfordshire. In this book Jameson chronicles his search for this elusive bird. It recounts his passion with antique books on natural history, and how they treat the Goshawk. He visits the locations where these authors lived and explored. He investigates the history of the bird's demise in Great Britain. He visits their habitats and talks to many experts.

Sightings of Goshawks in the UK are treated with extreme scepticism by the "experts". I compared our problems of identifying Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks with Goshawks and the British birder's trouble with Eurasian Sparrowhawks and a Gos. They are similar and some of the identification differences are the same. I think their doubt stems from a lack of familiarity. We see Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks with regularity and Goshawks occasionally. Using hawk watch data, for every Goshawk we see we should observe two dozen Cooper's and 200 Sharpshins. I have seen at least one Goshawk a year in the last few years. So they are not common, but we do see them and we identify the other accipiters regularly. It is telling that the author quotes several visitors from Europe, where

they see Goshawks regularly, with seeing this bird species near Sandy. Yet the author hesitates to identify many of his local raptor sightings.

The writing style is very far from dry and is often poetic. Reading his descriptions of the English countryside was, for me, nostalgic. It is delightful to join him as he wanders to different, picturesque localities. His enthusiasm for books, particularly classics, reflects my own. His comments on falconry and taxidermy are responsible yet understanding. But it is his endearing passion for this one bird that shines through.

I read with growing impatience until, a third of the way through the book, he finally sees a Goshawk — in Berlin. After the last war the allies confiscated all guns. As a result there was a rise in some bird populations, notably birds of prey. Goshawks now nest in a number of city parks, devastating the local populace of pigeons and crows. Is there a lesson for the City of Ottawa here?

So who should read this book? It is not aimed at the professional researcher. Its rambling style does provide a lot of information on the biology of this bird. It is, however, buried in musings that highlight the author's passion (actually it seems closer to an obsession). The author wanders through the English countryside with delightful, lyrical descriptions, gives detailed accounts of discussions with friends and muses on the content of books. These writings he ties, often with a tenuous connection, to Goshawks. Also buried in the text are some very interesting conservation issues and conundrums. (Would a number of species really be extirpated if the grouse and pheasant hunts were eliminated?). They highlight, not just the major impacts of humans, but a lot of more subtle effects. I believe this is a book for the enthusiastic naturalist who likes to sit by the window or fire and enjoy a relaxing time, while following their interest in the environment and sharing this man's zeal for the magnificent Gos.

On a personal note; a Goshawk was one of the very few creatures to attack me in the wild.

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