

Red Foxes in the Backyard, Blue Darters in the Trees



Photos and Article by Neil Weatherhogg

Professional photographers often encourage beginners to start taking photos of potential subjects most familiar to them, such as family and friends; flowers, autumn leaves, birds and butterflies in their yard; neighborhood parks and nearby natural areas. For example, Red Foxes would occasionally wander through our backyard on Burlingame Road about half a mile from Shunga Creek in Topeka, Kansas. My wife Janet and I kept our cameras close at hand for serendipitous occasions such as those.

One winter morning I looked out the window in my study to see two foxes, probably siblings, wander into our backyard. For about fifteen minutes or so, they played, they rested, they “danced”. All the while, as an awe-struck spectator standing indoors behind a plate glass window I observed and photographed them. What a gift to be able to witness this animal behavior up close within the city limits.

Since that memorable day, we have seen other fox on occasion, some staying only briefly, others for several hours. We have photographed various hawks and other bird life, an American Robin feeding her babies, a mother duck guarding her eggs next to



Neil and Janet Weatherhogg enjoy taking photos of neighborhood wildlife since they retired; Neil as pastor of Topeka's First Presbyterian Church, and Janet from teaching at Tecumseh North Elementary School. Neil has also photographed wildlife in South and Central America and Yellowstone Park.



Photo by Janet Weatherhogg

“The sleeping fox catches no poultry” – Benjamin Franklin



Cooper's Hawk



Sharp-shinned Hawk

a next-door neighbor's house, and a swallowtail resting on one of our butterfly bushes. The backyards for many of us provide a potpourri of possibilities for viewing and, if we choose, photographing various wildlife. In addition to providing habitat, food and/or water, there are often photographic rewards if one keeps a camera nearby and watches for interesting fauna and flora displays in one's own backyard.

Many dramas of nature are revealed in our backyards

With foxes on the prowl throughout the neighborhood, it doesn't seem like a safe place for a Mallard Duck to hide a nest. With Burlingame Road to cross to get ducklings to the nearest water, success is nearly "mission impossible". With a Cooper's Hawk and/or a Sharp-shinned Hawk observing every movement from the trees it seems like an equally challenging place for American Robins to nest.

Red Foxes are notorious waterfowl nest predators in the northern prairie pothole region. However, in areas where Coyotes are relatively abundant and a danger to smaller canines in the countryside, Red Foxes often resort to living in suburban neighborhoods and small towns. A ranch friend north of Emporia recently commented that a family of Red Foxes lives in his ranchstead and eats with their domestic cats. In some ways life here is more "enchanted," and they dramatically add to the enchantment that comes from the presence of wildlife near our homes. Life for Red Foxes has gotten better in suburban settings since domestic dogs are seldom allowed to run free.

With application to Coyotes as well as their domesticated cousins, a Danish Proverb seems to be fitting: *"Relatives are the worst friends, said the fox as the dogs took after him."*

Cooper's Hawks and the smaller Sharp-shinned Hawks are the two most common Accipiters in the United States. This group of raptors is characterized by slender body shapes, long tails, and short rounded wings that enable them to maneuver quickly and with agility in and out through trees in pursuit of other birds. They have long legs

and long talons which enable them to reach out while in flight to grasp and kill birds they have ambushed. That is how these birds gained the colloquial name "blue darters".

Back when many farms had free-roaming chickens, Cooper's Hawks were a threat. The 1945 edition of *BIRDS IN KANSAS*, published by the Kansas State Board of Agriculture maligned this native raptor, printing that, "It may flash into the poultry yard, strike and carry off a half-grown fowl too rapidly for one to apprehend the marauder, unless one is lying in wait... Unfortunately, so swift and strong are the movements...that they frequently escape their just fate."

That misguided "nuisance proclamation" helped give other hawks, especially the slower and more common Red-tailed Hawk, the undeserved designation as "chicken hawks" and misconception that they contribute substantially to the decline of gamebirds. However, relative to redtails the publication did go on to state that, "All farmers owe a great debt to this fine specimen for its aid in the control of rodents..." Fortunately, all hawks, owls and eagles are now protected.

In respect for the dynamics of nature, we try not to unnecessarily determine winners and losers to accommodate a diversity of wildlife. The best way to provide for songbirds and gamebirds is to provide exceptional habitat, including escape habitat. When feeding birds in one's backyard, a substantial shrub thicket or large relatively open brush pile near the feeders will provide a degree of security for many of the small birds that are attracted. – RDK