

Wings from two to three inches shorter than the tail, on the middle feathers of which are five, on the lateral six, broad whitish bands. Adult male with the cere greenish-yellow, the feet pale orange, the upper parts light bluish-grey, each feather with a black central line; lower parts reddish or yellowish-white, the breast and sides with large oblong brown spots; tibial feathers light red, streaked with blackish-brown. Female with the cere and legs greenish-yellow, the upper parts dark greyish-brown, the lower pale red, spotted as in the male. Young with the head light reddish-brown, streaked with dusky, the upper parts brownish-grey, the feathers margined and spotted with pale red, throat white, lower parts pale red, streaked with brown. The tail-bands vary from pale red to white.

THE AMERICAN SPARROW-HAWK.

+ *FALCO SPARVERIUS*, Linn.

PLATE XXII.—MALE AND FEMALE.

We have few more beautiful Hawks in the United States than this active little species, and I am sure, none half so abundant. It is found in every district from Louisiana to Maine, as well as from the Atlantic shores to the western regions. Every one knows the Sparrow-Hawk, the very mention of its name never fails to bring to mind some anecdote connected with its habits, and, as it commits no depredations on poultry, few disturb it, so that the natural increase of the species experiences no check from man. During the winter months especially it may be seen in the Southern States about every old field, orchard, barn-yard, or kitchen-garden, but seldom indeed in the interior of the forest.

Beautifully erect, it stands on the highest fence-stake, the broken top of a tree, the summit of a grain stack, or the corner of the barn, patiently and silently waiting until it spy a mole, a field-mouse, a cricket, or a grasshopper, on which to pounce. If disappointed in its expectation, it leaves its stand and removes to another, flying low and swiftly until within a few yards of the spot on which it wishes to alight, when all of a sudden, and in the most graceful manner, it rises towards it and settles with incomparable firmness of manner, merely suffering its beautiful tail to vibrate gently for awhile, its wings being closed with the swiftness of thought. Its keen eye perceives something beneath, when down it darts, secures the object in its talons, returns to its stand, and devours its prey piece by piece. This done, the



Sparrow Falcon.

little hunter rises in the air, describes a few circles, moves on directly, balances itself steadily by a tremulous motion of its wings, darts towards the earth, but, as if disappointed, checks its course, reascends and proceeds. Some unlucky finch crosses the field beneath it. The Hawk has marked it, and, anxious to secure its prize, sweeps after it; the chase is soon ended, for the poor affrighted and panting bird becomes the prey of the ruthless pursuer, who, unconscious of wrong, carries it off to some elevated branch of a tall tree, plucks it neatly, tears the flesh asunder, and having eaten all that it can pick, allows the skeleton and wings to fall to the ground, where they may apprise the traveller that a murder has been committed.

Thus, reader, are the winter months spent by this little marauder. When spring returns to enliven the earth, each male bird seeks for its mate, whose coyness is not less innocent than that of the gentle dove. Pursued from place to place, the female at length yields to the importunity of her dear tormentor, when side by side they sail, screaming aloud their love notes, which, if not musical, are doubtless at least delightful to the parties concerned. With tremulous wings they search for a place in which to deposit their eggs secure from danger, and now they have found it.

On that tall mouldering headless trunk, the Hawks have alighted side by side. See how they caress each other! Mark! The female enters the deserted Woodpecker's hole, where she remains some time measuring its breadth and depth. Now she appears, exultingly calls her mate, and tells him there could not be a fitter place. Full of joy they gambol through the air, chase all intruders away, watch the Grakles and other birds to which the hole might be equally pleasing, and so pass the time, until the female has deposited her eggs, six, perhaps even seven in number, round, and beautifully spotted. The birds sit alternately, each feeding the other and watching with silent care. After a while the young appear, covered with white down. They grow apace, and now are ready to go abroad, when their parents entice them forth. Some launch into the air at once, others, not so strong, now and then fall to the ground; but all continue to be well provided with food, until they are able to shift for themselves. Together they search for grasshoppers, crickets, and such young birds as, less powerful than themselves, fall an easy prey. The family still resort to the same field, each bird making choice of a stand, the top of a tree, or that of the Great Mullein. At times they remove to the ground, then fly off in a body, separate, and again betake themselves to their stands. Their strength increases, their flight improves, and the field-mouse seldom gains her retreat before the little Falcon secures it for a meal.

The trees, of late so richly green, now disclose the fading tints of autumn; the cricket becomes mute, the grasshopper withers on the fences, the mouse

retreats to her winter quarters, dismal clouds obscure the eastern horizon, the sun assumes a sickly dimness, hoarfrosts cover the ground, and the long night encroaches on the domains of light. No longer are heard the feathered choristers of the woods, who throng towards more congenial climes, and in their rear rushes the Sparrow-Hawk.

Its flight is rather irregular, nor can it be called protracted. It flies over a field, but seldom farther at a time; even in barren lands, a few hundred yards are all the extent it chooses to go before it alights. During the love season alone it may be seen sailing for half an hour, which is, I believe, the longest time I ever saw one on the wing. When chasing a bird, it passes along with considerable celerity, but never attains the speed of the Sharp-shinned Hawk or of other species. When teasing an Eagle or a Turkey-Buzzard, its strength seems to fail in a few minutes, and if itself chased by a stronger Hawk, it soon retires into some thicket for protection. Its migrations are pursued by day, and with much apparent nonchalance.

The cry of this bird so much resembles that of the European Kestrel, to which it seems allied, that, were it rather stronger in intonation, it might be mistaken for it. At times it emits its notes while perched, but principally when on the wing, and more continually before and after the birth of its young, the weaker cries of which it imitates when they have left the nest and follow their parents.

The Sparrow-Hawk does not much regard the height of the place in which it deposits its eggs, provided it be otherwise suitable, but I never saw it construct a nest for itself. It prefers the hole of a Woodpecker, but now and then is satisfied with an abandoned crow's nest. So prolific is it, that I do not recollect having ever found fewer than five eggs or young in the nest, and, as I have already said, the number sometimes amounts to seven. The eggs are nearly globular, of a deep buff-colour, blotched all over with dark brown and black. This Hawk sometimes raises two broods in the season, in the Southern States, where in fact it may be said to be a constant resident; but in the Middle and Eastern States, seldom if ever more than one. Nay, I have thought that in the South the eggs of a laying are more numerous than in the North, although of this I am not quite certain.

So much attached are they to their stand, that they will return to it and sit there by preference for months in succession. My friend BACHMAN informed me that, through this circumstance, he has caught as many as seven in the same field, each from its favourite stump.

Although the greater number of these Hawks remove southward at the approach of winter, some remain even in the State of New York during the severest weather of that season. These keep in the immediate neighbourhood of barns, where now and then they secure a rat or a mouse for their support.

Sometimes this species is severely handled by the larger Hawks. One of them who had caught a Sparrow, and was flying off with it, was suddenly observed by a Red-tailed Hawk, which in a few minutes made it drop its prey: this contented the pursuer and enabled the pursued to escape.

THEODORE LINCOLN, Esq. of Dennisville, Maine, informed me that the Sparrow-Hawk is in the habit of attacking the Republican Swallow, while sitting on its eggs, deliberately tearing the bottle-neck-like entrance of its curious nest, and seizing the occupant for its prey. This is as fit a place as any to inform you, that the father of that gentleman, who has resided at Dennisville upwards of forty years, found the Swallow just mentioned abundant there on his arrival in that then wild portion of the country.

In the Floridas the Sparrow-Hawk pairs as early as February, in the Middle States about April, and in the northern parts of Maine seldom before June. Few are seen in Nova Scotia, and none in Newfoundland, or on the western coast of Labrador. Although abundant in the interior of East Florida, I did not observe one on any of the keys which border the coast of that singular peninsula. During one of my journeys down the Mississippi, I frequently observed some of these birds standing on low dead branches over the water, from which they would pick up the beetles that had accidentally fallen into the stream.

No bird can be more easily raised and kept than this beautiful Hawk. I once found a young male that had dropped from the nest before it was able to fly. Its cries for food attracted my notice, and I discovered it lying near a log. It was large, and covered with soft white down, through which the young feathers protruded. Its little blue bill and yet grey eyes made it look not unlike an owl. I took it home, named it Nero, and provided it with small birds, at which it would scramble fiercely, although yet unable to tear their flesh, in which I assisted it. In a few weeks it grew very beautiful, and became so voracious, requiring a great number of birds daily, that I turned it out, to see how it would shift for itself. This proved a gratification to both of us: it soon hunted for grasshoppers and other insects, and on returning from my walks I now and then threw a dead bird high in the air, which it never failed to perceive from its stand, and towards which it launched with such quickness as sometimes to catch it before it fell to the ground. The little fellow attracted the notice of his brothers, brought up hard by, who, accompanied by their parents, at first gave it chase, and forced it to take refuge behind one of the window-shutters, where it usually passed the night, but soon became gentler towards it, as if forgiving its desertion. My bird was fastidious in the choice of food, would not touch a Woodpecker, however fresh, and as he grew older, refused to eat birds that were in the least tainted. To the last he continued kind to me, and never failed to return

at night to his favourite roost behind the window-shutter. His courageous disposition often amused the family, as he would sail off from his stand, and fall on the back of a tame duck, which, setting up a loud quack, would waddle off in great alarm with the Hawk sticking to her. But, as has often happened to adventurers of similar spirit, his audacity cost him his life. A hen and her brood chanced to attract his notice, and he flew to secure one of the chickens, but met one whose parental affection inspired her with a courage greater than his own. The conflict, which was severe, ended the adventures of poor Nero.

I have often observed birds of this species in the Southern States, and more especially in the Floridas, which were so much smaller than those met with in the Middle and Northern Districts, that I felt almost inclined to consider them different; but after studying their habits and voice, I became assured that they were the same. Another species allied to the present, and alluded to by WILSON, has never made its appearance in our Southern States.

AMERICAN SPARROW-HAWK, *Falco sparverius*, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. ii. p. 117.

FALCO SPARVERIUS, Bonap. Syn., p. 27.

AMERICAN SPARROW-HAWK, *Falco sparverius*, Nutt. Man., vol. i. p. 58.

FALCO SPARVERIUS, *Little Rusty-crowned Falcon*, Swains. and Rich. F. Bor. Amer., vol. ii. p. 31.

AMERICAN SPARROW-HAWK, *Falco sparverius*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. ii. p. 246; vol. v. p. 370.

Adult Male.

Upper part of the head and wing-coverts light greyish-blue, seven black spots round the head, and a light red patch on the crown; back light red, spotted with black; tail red, with a broad subterminal black band. Female with the head nearly as in the male; the back, wing-coverts, and tail banded with light red and dusky. Young similar to the female, but with more red on the head, which is streaked with dusky.

Length 12 inches; extent of wings 22.

GENUS X.—ASTUR, Cuv. HAWK.

Bill short, robust; its upper outline sloping, and nearly straight at the base, then decurved; cere short, bare above; edge of upper mandible with a festoon, succeeded by a broad sinus. Nostrils elliptical. Feet of moderate length; tarsi moderate or slender, feathered at least one-third of their length, broadly scutellate before and behind; first and second toes strongest and



Sparrow Falcon.



Audubon, John James. 1840. "The American Sparrow-Hawk, *Falco sparverius*, Linn. [Pl. 22]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 1, 90–94. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319135>.

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