

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK (*ACCIPITER STRIATUS*) NEST IN THE EAST GULF COASTAL PLAIN OF ALABAMA

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A recent review (Bildstein and Meyer 2000) and other reports (Shackelford et al. 1996 and references therein) of the Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) suggest that East Gulf Coastal breeding records are rare and breeding biology data from the southeast U.S. are lacking. The breeding area on the range map in Bildstein and Meyer (2000) does not include Texas and Louisiana, and only the extreme northern portions of Alabama and Georgia are included. However, there are recent records of this species in Texas and Louisiana (Shackelford et al. 1996), and we report a very southern record of a nest from Alabama. The nest we report is the southernmost breeding record for Alabama (Imhof 1976).

On 20 July 2000, while surveying Bachman's Sparrows (*Aimophila aestivalis*), we found a Sharp-shinned Hawk nest in the Conecuh National Forest, Escambia County, Alabama (31°08' 7.5" N, 86°36' 00" W). The nest was located 40 ft (12 m) from the ground in a slash pine (*Pinus elliottii*) of approximately 12 in (30 cm) dbh and 50 ft (15 m) in height. The surrounding forest was a flatwoods longleaf pine (*P. palustris*) community that had been frequently burned. The understory was open with wiregrass (*Aristida stricta*) as the dominant cover. The fringe of a densely vegetated bayswamp dominated by sweet bay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*), bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), and red maple (*Acer rubrum*) was only 30 ft (9 m) from the nest. Although the nest was next to the tree trunk, it was completely visible from below and appeared to be composed entirely of sticks. The nest diameter was approximately 16-20 in (40-50 cm). The nest and nest-site descriptions are consistent with other Sharp-shinned Hawk nests described in pine-dominated forests of the southeastern United States (Shackelford et al. 1996) and elsewhere (e.g., Wiggers and Kritz 1991).

The female would often land on the nest and vocalize when either one of us approached the nest tree. The female flew within a few yards when the first author mimicked the "kik kik kik" call. Three juveniles were seen flying in the canopy of the nearby bayswamp but never went near the nest; however, a male Sharp-shinned Hawk was never observed in the area. Directly under the nest were three Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*) skulls along with several small (probably passerine) bones. Predation on Red-bellied Woodpeckers by Sharp-shinned Hawks has been documented elsewhere (Shackelford et al.

2000). No fresh remains were found although we searched an area of several meters around the base of the nest tree. No individuals were seen near the nest on 12 August 2000 or the following year. However, an apparently territorial male Sharp-shinned Hawk was seen on 17 May 2001 about 7 miles (11 km) away from the nest site on property of the Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center (W. D. Robinson, pers. comm.). This male was circling overhead and calling, which is behavior indicative of breeding activity (Delannoy and Cruz 1988).

Across its North American range, Sharp-shinned Hawks prefer to nest in conifers (Brown and Amadon 1989, Bildstein and Meyer 2000). Longleaf pine once dominated the canopy of the Gulf Coastal Plain but deforestation and fire suppression resulted in the loss of approximately 95% of this ecosystem (Outcalt and Sheffield 1996). In areas where fire is suppressed, the naturally open understory dominated by herbaceous ground cover is replaced by a dense understory of shrubs probably making it a less-preferred habitat for nesting Sharp-shinned Hawks. Currently, longleaf pine communities on federal lands in the southeastern United States are being restored through frequent burning and planting of longleaf pine. The southern extension of breeding records of Sharp-shinned Hawks in recent years (Shackelford et al. 1996 and this record) may indicate a positive response of Sharp-shinned Hawk to the restoration of longleaf pine communities. We are not suggesting that southeastern pine forests should be managed specifically for Sharp-shinned Hawks, but it is interesting to speculate on whether this species is expanding its range or is reoccupying its historic range in response to restoration efforts. Also, it is particularly interesting that the remains we found beneath the nest were those of the Red-bellied Woodpecker, a documented competitor of nesting holes and nest predator of endangered Red-cockaded Woodpeckers (*Picoides borealis*)(Shackelford et al. 2000).

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