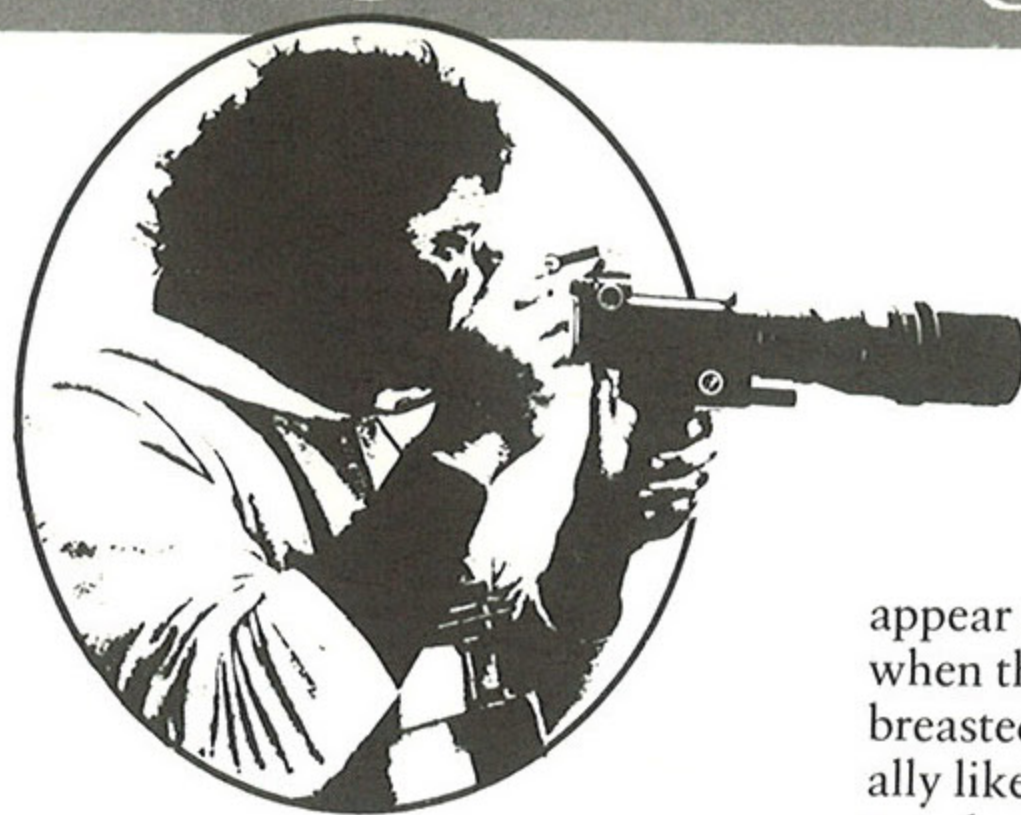


# Accipiters

Rich Stallcup

*This is the second in a series of "Focus" articles by Rich Stallcup on the field identification of common but very similar birds. These articles are intended to provide readers with recently discovered or previously overlooked information that is not contained in the standard field guides. We hope this series will add to your understanding of ornithology and taxonomy, increase your enjoyment of birds, inspire you to become more exacting in your own observations, and encourage you to discover on your own additional and as yet unknown truths of bird identification.*

—Dave DeSante



SEVERAL ARTICLES HAVE APPEARED recently concerning field identification of hawks in the genus *Accipiter*. Some contain almost no information, some simply contain misinformation, and all are prepared by authors with strong eastern biases, which clouds analysis of western forms.

Judging from what we have seen and heard from 'raptor experts' and 'seasoned observers' at Point Diablo (Red-shouldered called Goshawks, Northern Harriers called Cooper's, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned often mixed, and Monarch Butterflies called Broad-winged Hawks), a crisp diagnosis of field identification for all raptors seems to be in order.

Here is one segment, the forest hawks. They are designed for pursuing prey in wood and thickets (but often soar while on migration). Short, sturdy, broad wings, long legs, and long tails used as rudders are traits common to all three species occurring in the United States.

Formerly, tail shape and lately, overall size have been emphasized as a (sometimes *the*) diagnostic feature. Both are ambiguous under less than perfect conditions. Sharp-shinneds' tails appear quite rounded when spread, and Cooper's' tails may be squared or even notched when molting, as these feathers are dropped and regrown symmetrically, beginning with the innermost (longest) pair. (Regardless of the shape of the whole tail tip, individual feathers have different shapes—Sharp-shinneds' being squared and Cooper's' rounded.) Although it is true that there is no overlap in size between the species, female Sharp-shinneds and male Cooper's, as well as female Cooper's and male Goshawks, may be so close as to trick the eye. Females are larger than their

mates in these groups. Overall size is often of some help, especially if the bird is near a familiar object (like a crow, as one article suggested!), but given the way we usually see them, against a universal background such as sky or distant forest, our perception of size becomes, at best, guesswork.

*Shape of flying birds* is by far the easiest and most useful character and does not change during molt or due to individual variation. Sharp-shinneds are the *most compact* of the hawks, having short, usually squared (when closed) tails and relatively tiny heads with no apparent neck. At some distance one has to look hard even to see a head. The leading edge of the wing at the wrist is often held forward of the tip of the bill. The wings are short relative to those of Goshawks but are slightly longer relative to a Cooper's. When these birds are diving or gliding downwind, the wingtips

appear much more pointed than they do when the birds are flying at ease. Streak-breasted immatures may appear superficially like Merlins. A Merlin, however, has a very large head.

Cooper's are the *longest*, usually having rounded tails which are relatively much longer than those of Sharp-shinneds and noticeably longer than Goshawks'. Their wings are proportionally a little shorter than those of Sharp-shinneds and much shorter than Goshawks', giving Cooper's an even longer appearance. The head of Cooper's is larger than that of Sharp-shinneds, and is mounted on a noticeable neck. Most of the head is carried forward of the foremost bit of wing.

Goshawks are the *widest* accipiters, with the heaviest bodies and proportionally longer wings. The wings often appear much *more pointed* than those of the other two species. Their tails, in both relative length and terminal shape, are intermediate between those of its two smaller cousins. Goshawks have large heads, thick necks and heavy chests.

Differences in the manner of *flight* are more subtle and perhaps variable than shape, but with much practice can be used for specific identification. Since it is a matter of buoyancy and is much affected by air currents, it is difficult to describe in words. Sharp-shinneds are the most tight and twinkly, Cooper's are more loose and floppy, and Goshawks are the heaviest, not unlike the heft of Red-shouldered Hawks, but they accelerate with deeper, more frantic wingbeats. One must look hard at flying known-species birds until these traits click in. Once they do, most individuals may be accurately identified as far away as they are seen. That's all that can be said—it's a matter of practice.

The appearance of the dark and light *bands on the tail* may be used to tell Goshawks from the smaller two. Because of the pattern on each feather and the way they overlie one another, the Goshawk has wavy dark bands, while Cooper's and Sharp-shinneds have bands that are straighter across. This mark is of highest utility on perched birds where sometimes not much more than the tail can even be seen and is most obvious on the light, ventral surface.

Distribution of *color and patterns of light and dark on immature birds* are also distinctive and provide consistent differences. Sharp-shinneds have a white base color to the underparts, overlaid with heavy, blurred, brown streaks, making a

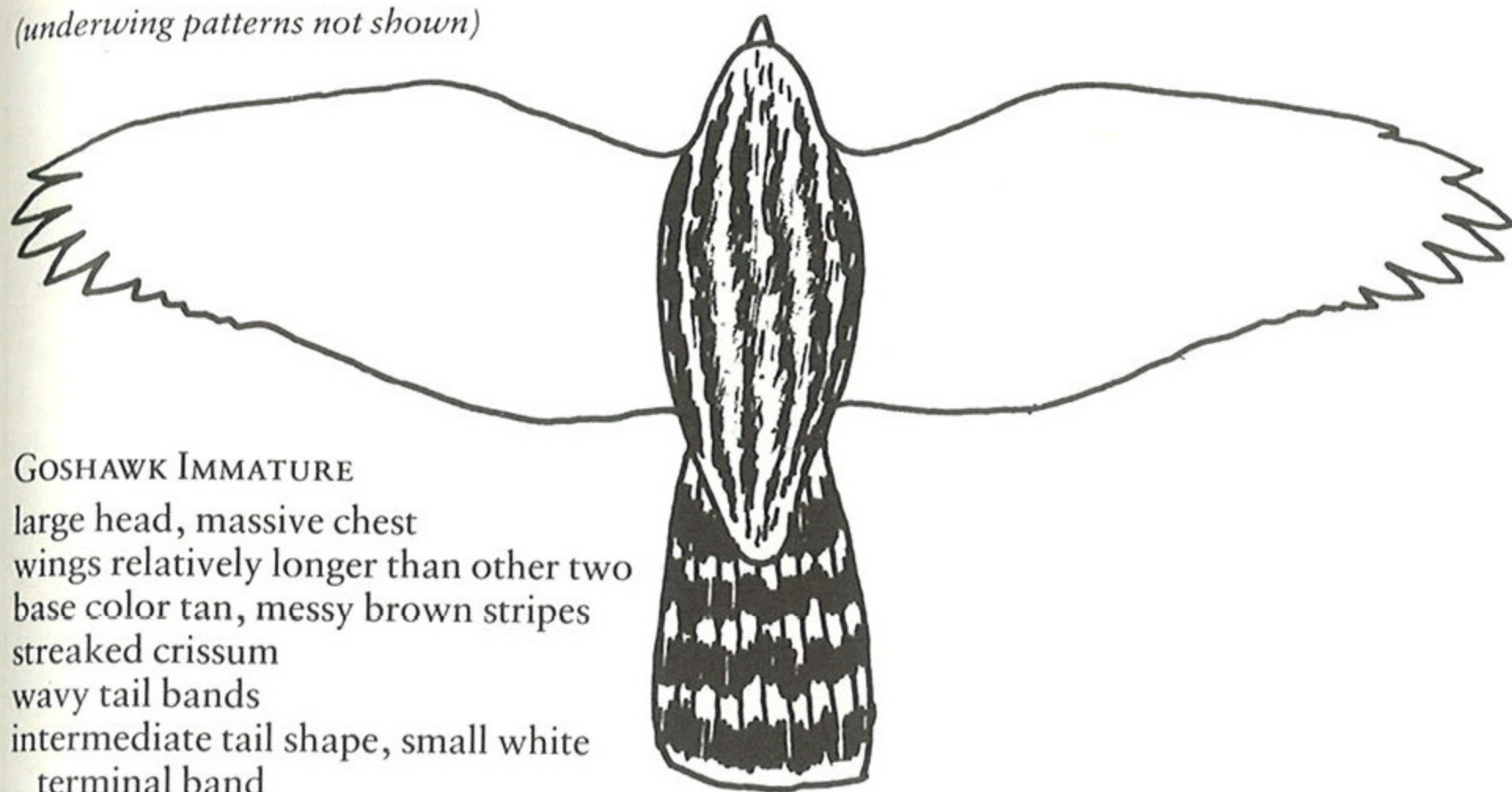
Goshawk

Sharp-shinned Hawk  
(Cooper's similar)

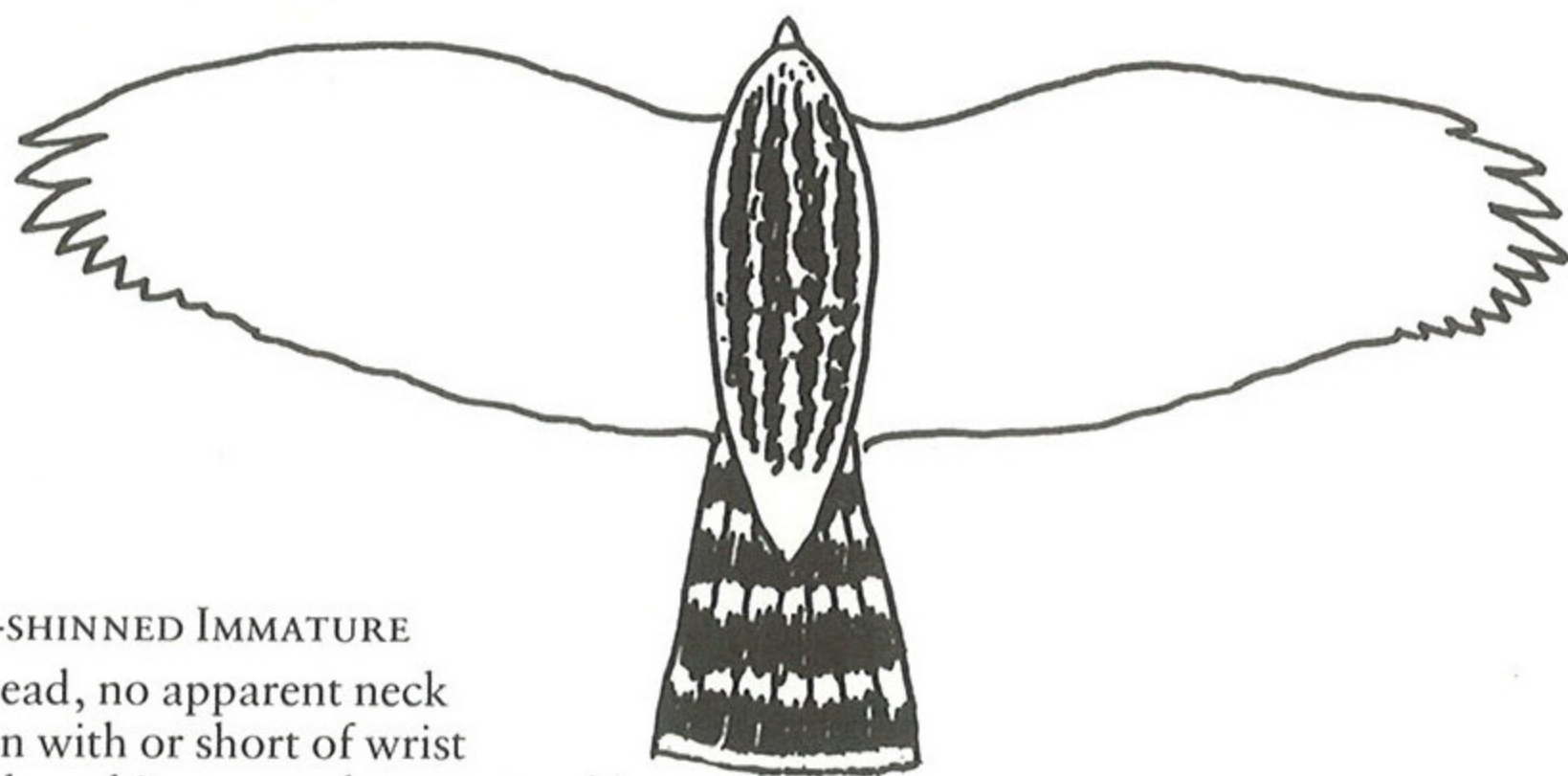


Tail feather pattern shows why Goshawk has wavy bands on tail.

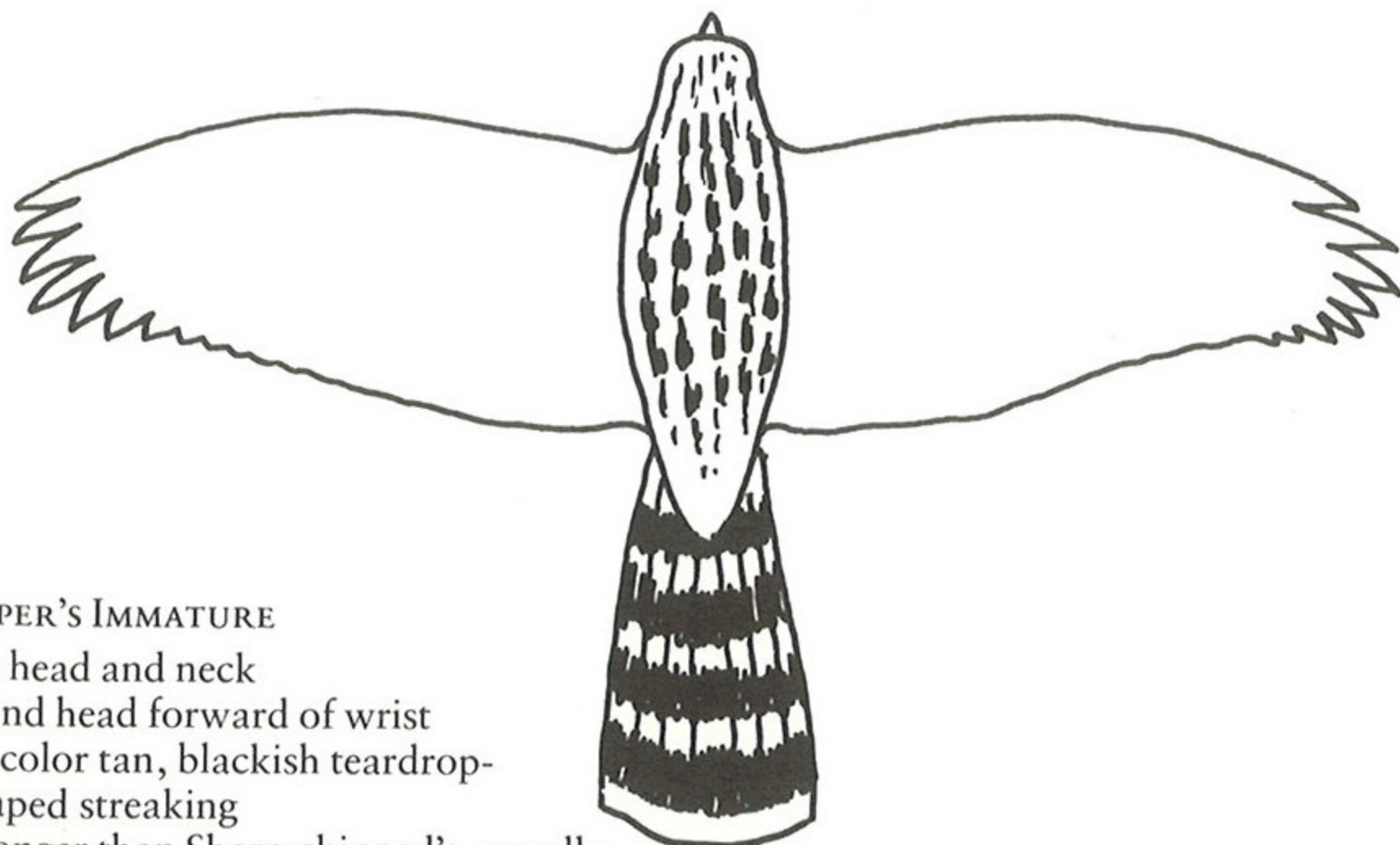
(underwing patterns not shown)



**GOSHAWK IMMATURE**  
 large head, massive chest  
 wings relatively longer than other two  
 base color tan, messy brown stripes  
 streaked crissum  
 wavy tail bands  
 intermediate tail shape, small white  
 terminal band



**SHARP-SHINNED IMMATURE**  
 small head, no apparent neck  
 bill even with or short of wrist  
 base color white, messy brown streaking  
 tail relatively short, usually squared or  
 notched, little or no white terminal band



**COOPER'S IMMATURE**  
 large head and neck  
 bill and head forward of wrist  
 base color tan, blackish teardrop-  
 shaped streaking  
 tail longer than Sharp-shinned's, usually  
 rounded, conspicuous white terminal band

Formerly, tail shape and lately, overall size, have been emphasized as a diagnostic feature. Both are ambiguous under less than perfect conditions.

very dense and somewhat messy pattern. Their leggings appear dark rusty from dense barring. Cooper's have a tanner base color to their underparts, especially the breast, with definite rows of clearly-shaped teardrops which are blacker than the other species'. Their leggings appear an even tan from pale, irregular barring. The white terminal tail band of Cooper's is twice as wide and much more striking than that of sharpies and Goshawks. Immature Goshawks' underparts are like Sharp-shinned's but have long, streaked crissums or undertail coverts. Crissums of immature Sharp-shinned's and especially Cooper's are white, in Cooper's often fluffing up around the sides of the rump. Remember, this is for immature birds; patterns of adults are very different. In adults, the Goshawk is the one with big, puffy white undertail coverts.

Seldom are these birds close enough, but when they are, take a good look at the faces. An immature Sharp-shinned's face is plain—dull brown over whitish with little or no pale supercilium (eye brow). An immature Cooper's face is also brownish but with streaks of yellow giving a veiled-in-gold impression which is quite noticeable even in flight at close range. (Through the first winter, wear reduces the usefulness of this trait). There is a narrow but definite tan supercilium. Goshawk faces are dull brown but have an obvious, bold tan-to-white supercilium which flares behind the eye.

Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks are nearly equally common in mid-coastal California during migration and in winter. The Goshawk is a resident of the high Cascades and Sierra Nevada and is accidental west of the Sierran crest in winter.

Dave DeSante and Will Russell read the rough form of this note and suggested meaningful additions.

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