

HAWKISH BEHAVIOR

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In the midst of this bomb cyclone, five minutes outdoors in the bracing cold is enough to make one think about heading back inside for a hot beverage. But for our resident wildlife, there is no such thing as returning indoors, no break from the strong winds and biting cold. All they have on their agenda is to survive yet another subzero night. Some species manage by hibernating, like bears, and others by going into a daily torpor, like some rodents, only rousing themselves to feed when needed. Even our backyard Carolina chickadees reduce their temperature by 50 degrees F at night to lessen the load on their internal furnace to keep warm. But all the active animals face a daily existential question: How much time do they devote to searching for food vs. staying as stationary as possible to minimize activity and energy expenditure? Putting on fat for the winter—the bane of suburbanites—is for other vertebrates a survival mechanism, all that stands between life and death for the birds and squirrels just outside the window and pecking at the feeder.

And if you do provision your feeder with seed and suet, don't be surprised to see our most common large hawk taking full advantage of your generosity. In some neighborhoods, the red-shouldered hawk, *Buteo lineatus*, has habituated to hanging out near feeders to feast on suet-fattened songbirds. So named because of its solid rufous colored feathers at the shoulder, this local bird hunter can sometimes be confused with the Cooper's hawk, a more slender bird of prey with a more "athletic" looking frame than the stocky red-shouldered. The tail with three or four white bars is also a giveaway.

In our neighborhood, you are most likely to see a red-shouldered hawk along the Potomac as its preferred habitat is not backyards but wooded habitat along streams. Four winters ago, in February, we had a



A pair of Red-shouldered Hawks preparing their nest. (Illustration by Trudy Nicholson)

heavy snowfall that remained on the ground for a few days, blanketing the towpath in enough snow that it was a winter gift for those of us who love cross-country skiing. The towpath, with its sparkling views of the Potomac, became a destination of choice. I was gliding home one day from below Great Falls to Cabin John when I came upon a red-shouldered hawk perched on a tree branch across from me, looking over the frozen canal. When I approached too closely to admire it, it took off, flying ahead of me. Then I passed it again, and this time it let me go first, but flew along behind and landed again. This repeat leapfrogging went on for another mile, then I realized what might be going on: the female red-shouldered was using me as a hunting dog, seeing what game I could scare up from the ground or which birds I could flush from hiding. A rodent of some sort traversed the trail in front of my skis. Then a group of robins, hiding in a clump of holly, flushed. The hawk wasted no time and headed straight for the birds. I

never found out if the hunt was successful. It was too cold and getting dark and I still had a ways to go to reach home.

I had never seen such hawk behavior before, or had been an accomplice to a hunt in such a way. In the course of our daily lives, we are so cut off from wild nature that the chance to witness or be part of such an interaction becomes more of a once in a lifetime moment than a daily occurrence. The opportunity happened in part by luck, and in part because on a weekday, when others were at work and the towpath was essentially empty of humans, I was able to enjoy a spectacle I would never have otherwise seen.

Life is lived on the edge for a lot of species when the temperature drops below freezing. But it is also when nature can rise to the surface of our limited attention spans and inferior levels of awareness. Venturing out on bitter cold winter days reveals nature waiting to be discovered. **VN**