

PREDATORS and our FEATHERED FOWL

By: Wanda Zwart

PART 2- BIRDS OF PREY

Intro

In my job as a forester/conservationist of nature I do everything to protect our (often endangered) predators. Still, as a fancier myself, I can understand how most people feel about them.

What can you do to protect your chickens, pigeons, waterfowl or such? To start with you could read some books about behaviour and manner of life of predators. This will often help you to find out which predator has been visiting your pen, so that you can take adequate measures. In fact it is useless to put out a live electric wire for a fox, if it was a marten that was visiting you.

Keep in mind that animals don't act from 'emotions'; they simply work on instincts, having only one thing that counts: "Live and survive". If a predator succeeds in catching our birds then it is us that have failed in protecting our animals and there is only one to blame: yourself!

Wanda



**Above: Buzzerd.
Photo A. v.d. Burg**

You come home and see a buzzard flying away of a carcass of one of your chickens or pheasant. Most often this bird is pointed out to be the killer, but is it true?

The Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*)

Buzzards are mainly scavengers, but, next to this, mice are their main food source (occasionally, they may catch a reptile or an amphibian). Pay attention when driving your car, they can be spotted very often along roads, on the lookout for a road-kill. In the years with fewer mice than usual you instantly see fluctuations in the buzzard-population. Buzzards are sturdy birds and therefore not equipped for fast prey. Besides, young Goshawks and Buzzards do look rather similar if you don't look close.



Left: Buzzard. Photo Aviculture Europe.
Above: Young goshawk. Photo: Wigry.
See the resemblance with the buzzard.
Below: Mature goshawk, notice the different plumage. Photo: Brane Koren.

The Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)

Another large bird of prey in Western-Europe is the Goshawk. They are active hunters, true masters in attacking their pray in complete silence, very manoeuvrable in dense woods and true acrobats in open skies.

They are lean birds with slender wings that give them speed.

What I often see in my own living area is that the Goshawk is usually the one killing my fowl. The animal comes flying low, in one line with the horizon, so it's almost invisible to the prey. With one fast hit under the wing the long talons perforate the lungs instantly.



Left: Talon of a Goshawk



Goshawks are timid animals and rarely show themselves. The smallest movement scares them away, leaving their prey behind. This is a perfect opportunity for the Buzzard that has spotted the action from its post nearby.

Goshawks can grab their prey while flying in mid air (pigeons are often on the menu) therefore fancy breeds have no chance of surviving the attack of an adult goshawk.

The goshawk is an endangered species in the Netherlands, but locally they can bring quite some damage to breeders that keep free ranging fowl (usually in the areas with woodlands nearby).

The female goshawk is large enough to bring a pheasant or medium large fowl back to her nest. Therefore it is possible that you don't find anything back.



Left: Remains of a preyed woodpecker (nuthatch) by a goshawk.
Photo Wanda Zwart

A couple of loose feathers and/or a tiny amount of blood drops can be clues of an air strike by a goshawk.

Jays and crows, as well as gulls, are on the menu of goshawk. These bird species can cause quite some inconvenience.

The sparrow-hawk (*Accipiter nisus*)

In fact, this bird can be seen as a miniature goshawk (although goshawks will hunt them!). They are typical forest birds, although when they lose their habitat they can sometimes adapt to city life as well. Singing birds constitute their main food source, representing the species on which the sparrow-hawks have focused their hunting techniques (that is the reason why they are called 'flight-hunters'). The female is a bit larger than the male and she can even kill a pigeon, although she won't be able to bring it to her nest, as she weighs only about 264 grams.

Right: Sparrow hawk.
Photo Wanda Zwart.

Another species, the Harrier (or Marsh Hawk)

The Dutch name for the Harrier means originally 'chick thief', although this is a myth. These birds live in the proximity of watery areas and they usually feed on small mammals. Harriers have difficulties surviving in the Netherlands. We haven't got enough possible nesting areas and there is a heavy pressure of recreation. This species is very sensitive and they are disturbed easily.

What could you do to prevent your stock from becoming prey?

First of all, fowls are best protected by a strong, enduring pen. But free ranging ought to be possible too. In that case always make sure you have enough hiding places (for instance bushes). Especially groups of fowl get used to keep an eye on possible predators quite quickly. The rooster will alarm mostly on time and



the others seek a hiding place. A tactic both fowl and pigeons have developed is to 'drop dead' (when no other options are open anymore). Birds of prey focus on quick movements and will be confused if that suddenly stops.

For instance Goshawks can hunt lined up with the horizon; by placing objects around your yard this technique is negligible. Also a loose dog helps preventing attacks from any predator. Another tactic (not really proven yet) is hanging moving or shiny objects in your yard.

The protection for the flocks of pigeons is not an easy task for the breeder, even though the concept of 'safety in numbers' does apply here (most predators hunt alone and can only grab one prey at a time).

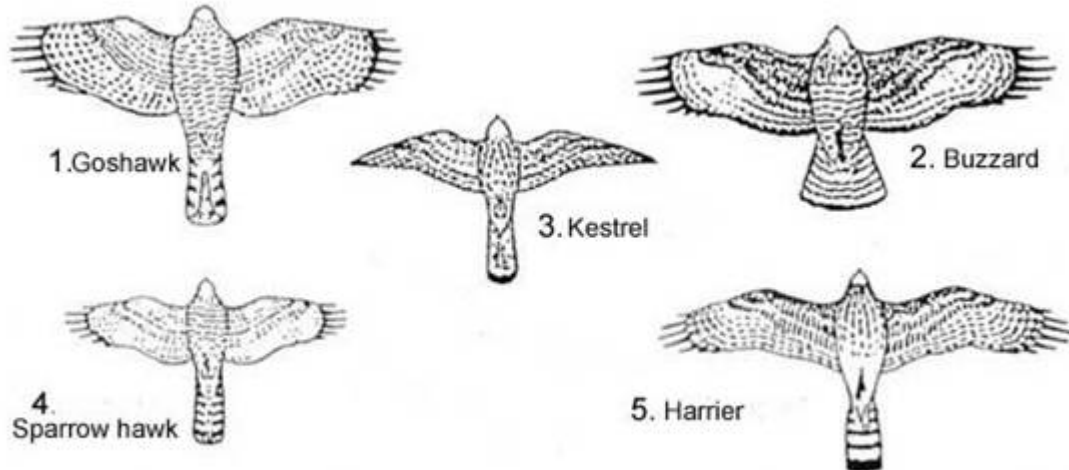
A tactic tried by pigeon-fanciers is painting the pigeons in bright colours or by painting 'eyes' on the wing shields, but I don't know if this really works in practice.

The goshawk prefers to grab its prey in the air. The sparrow-hawk preys close to the ground or roofs and follows its prey to the smallest corner, sometimes even inside the loft!

Left: The Sparrow Hawk is smaller than the goshawk. Photo Wanda Zwart.



The drawing of the silhouette (below) may help you learn to identify the different birds of prey.



Being in the yard yourself is a great defence for your animals. You could choose to only let your animals roam freely when you are in the yard yourself.

Another trick is to listen to other bird species... learn their alarm calls. Jays, magpies and crows will scream loud when a goshawk (or other raptor/predator that is dangerous for them) appears.

They usually sound the alarm before a prey has been selected, so you have a good chance of preventing an attack on your animals. (By running outside when that alarm sounds.)