

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
August 3, 2008

Hawk Watch
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For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



Juvenile Cooper's Hawks are often seen on the ground.

Last winter you may have observed with dismay a hawk lurking around your bird feeder attacking your avian guests. Was it between 14 and 20 inches high with a slate gray back, rusty barred breast and well-rounded barred tail? If so a Cooper's Hawk has discovered a convenient restaurant (chances are he or she will be back next winter). Accipiters, the hawk group to which the Cooper's Hawk belongs, are bird hawks. "FOOD: Chiefly birds" (Peterson Field Guide to the Birds).

This time of the year in Chautauqua County when most of the bird feeders, except hummingbird feeders, are empty, the Cooper's Hawks are lurking in their native habitat, the woods. Their short rounded wings and long tails are adapted for quick aerial maneuvering and sudden drops, which helps them dodge between tree trunks and branches in pursuit of their feathered prey.

A family of juvenile Cooper's Hawks have been amusing the residents of and visitors to Chautauqua Institution for the past couple of summers. Due to its history of tree conservation the Institution is essentially an old growth forest. Consequently it provides the appropriate habitat for Cooper's Hawks. Cooper's Hawks are territorial breeders which means they will nest in the same area for several years. The nest is a platform of sticks high in a tree. Eggs are laid in early summer and hatch in 25 days into little white fuzzballs. These fuzzballs gradually mature over a period of about three weeks growing real feathers. As fledglings they wear juvenile plumage of brown on the back and white with brown streaks on the breast and are ready to leave the nest. It is midsummer by the time the young birds reach this stage. This is when the Chautauquans encounter them. Although the juvenile birds are full grown and able to fly they are "young and stupid." They have little fear of humans and hop about on the ground attempting to catch wily gray squirrels, much to the amusement of their spectators. They rarely succeed in capturing a meal but these teenage hawks will not starve. The parents will feed the

fledglings while they work on their hunting skills. Each week the young hawks become more adventuresome. They are seen further and further from their nesting place and more in the trees than on the ground. Gradually their hunting skills improve so that they no longer rely on mom and dad and are adept at capturing avian prey. By winter these young hawks sporting a grayer back and rustier chest (full adult plumage does not appear until the birds are two years old) will probably have figured out where the best restaurants around human habitat are and will be seen lurking around somebody's bird feeder.

The CWC is a member-supported, local grassroots 501(c)(3) tax exempt watershed education, pollution prevention and land trust organization. It seeks your support and participation to conserve Chautauqua Lake's most important endangered shore lands and implement yards and grounds practices which reduce and minimize nutrient and sediment inputs to our waterways, which fuel nuisance plant and algae growth. Membership donations can be made by calling 664-2166.