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Jimmie R. Parrish
Department of Zoology
159 WIBD
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah 84602

George S. Wise, III
6960 Carlowe Ave.
Cocoa, FL 32927

Send reprint requests to Jimmie R. Parrish.

NESTING RECORDS FOR THE SHARP-SHINNED HAWK (ACCIPTER STRIATUS) IN ALABAMA

Bill Summerour

Sharp-shinned Hawks (Accipter striatus) have been recorded in summer over the entire state except Mobile and south Baldwin Counties (Imhof, 1976) and nest wherever they occur during the spring and summer months. They are apparently nowhere abundant in Alabama during the breeding season from March through July, ranging from uncommon to fairly common in areas of favorable habitat. The species is statewide during the non-breeding season and is most

common on the coast during fall migration (Alabama Agricultural Extension Service, 1984).

In the late 1800's, Dr. William Avery listed the Sharp-shinned Hawk as a resident and breeding species at Greensboro in Hale County, and Edward Graves considered the species a common breeder on Sand Mountain (Howell, 1928). But it was not until 1954 that the first positive breeding evidence of a nest containing eggs was found by the author near Moore's Mill Creek, approximately 3 miles southeast of Auburn, in Lee County (Figure 1). Two other nests have since been found by the author, both in Cleburne County in northeast Alabama. A fourth nest, discovered by Jim Parrish and George Wise near Old Camp Cosby in Jefferson County, was found and described after the young had fledged from the nest.

The first nest found in 1954 was discovered by the author on 25 April in the Piedmont hill country near Auburn. The nest was about eight meters (25 feet) above the ground in a rather dense, loblolly pine (Pinus taeda), 30 centimeters in diameter and 13 meters in height growing on a gently sloping, mixed pine hardwood hillside. As I walked under the tree to get a better look, a Sharp-shinned Hawk suddenly darted from the nest and flew off into the woods.

The nest, as viewed from below, was large enough to conceal the sitting female and was a compact structure of twigs of uniform size placed against the trunk of the tree and supported by several limbs growing out from one side of the trunk. It was concealed within the crown of the tree which had limbs reaching to within 3 meters of the ground.

The following day, on 26 April, I returned to climb the tree and this time the female didn't flush until I started up the tree. The nest held two pale bluish-gray eggs, heavily blotched and spotted with rich chestnut brown and chocolate. There was no lining of bark chips, the eggs resting directly on the twig floor of the slightly concave nest. The twigs lining the middle of the nest were smaller than those making up the rest of the nest, and were interwoven to form a slightly concave platform for the eggs.

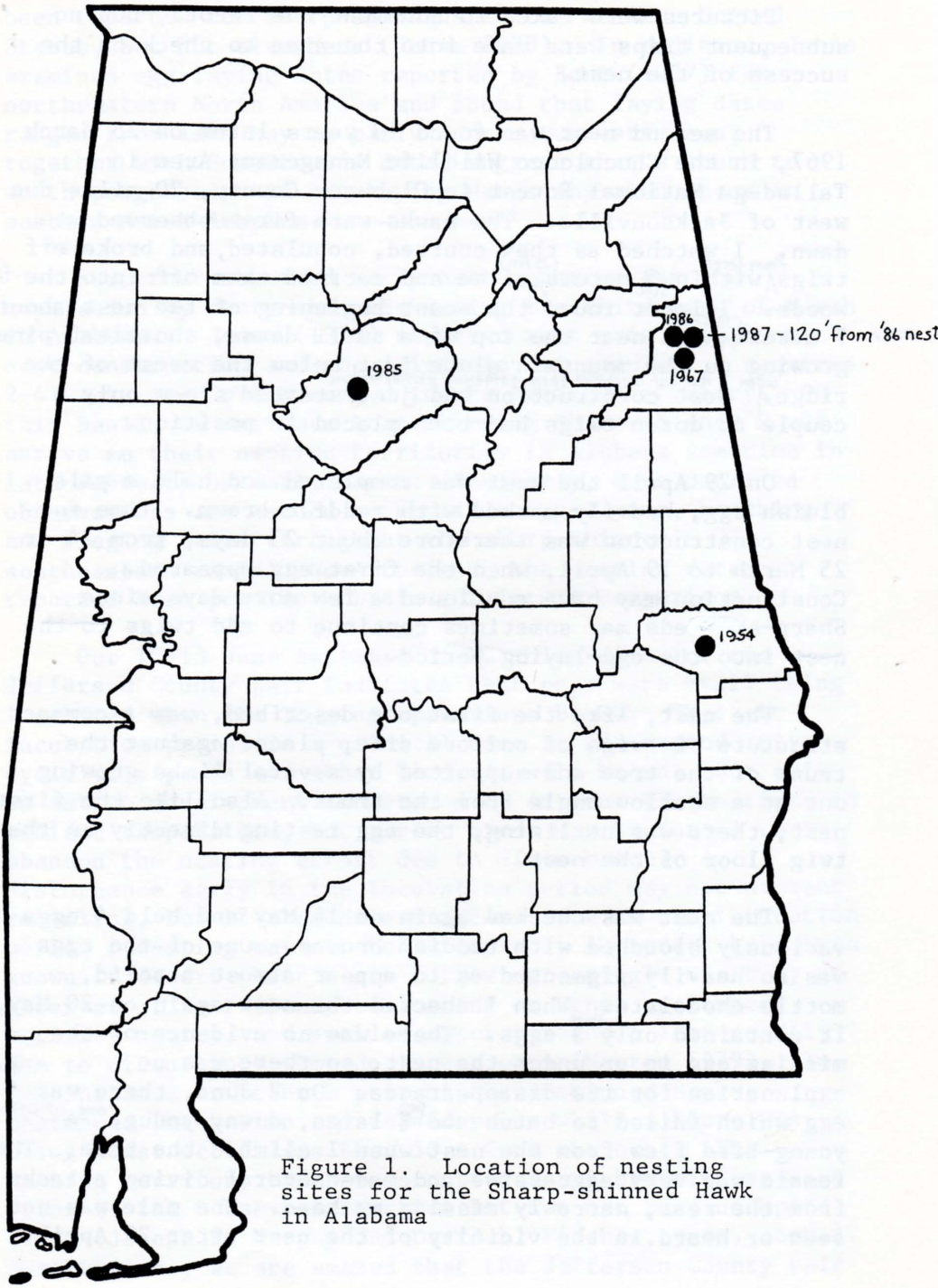

Figure 1. Location of nesting sites for the Sharp-shinned Hawk in Alabama

Pictures were taken to document the record, but no subsequent trips were made into the area to check on the success of the nest.

The second nest was found 13 years later on 25 March 1967, in the Chocolocco Wildlife Management Area in Talladega National Forest in Cleburne County, 20 miles due west of Jacksonville. The hawks were first observed at dawn. I watched as they courted, copulated, and broke off twigs within 5 meters of me and carried them off into the woods. I later found the scant beginning of the nest about 7 meters high near the top of a small dense, shortleaf pine growing on the mountain slope just below the crest of the ridge. Nest construction had just started since only a couple of dozen twigs had been placed in position.

On 29 April the nest was completed and held a pale bluish egg, heavily marked with reddish brown. Time for nest construction was therefore about 25 days, from 24 or 25 March to 19 April, when the first egg appeared. Construction may have continued a few more days since Sharp-shinneds may sometimes continue to add twigs to the nest into the egg-laying period.

The nest, like the first one described, was a compact structure of twigs of uniform size, placed against the trunk of the tree and supported by several limbs growing out at a shallow angle from the trunk. Also like the first nest, there was no lining, the egg resting directly on the twig floor of the nest.

The nest was checked again on 14 May and held 4 eggs variously blotched with reddish browns. One of the eggs was so heavily pigmented as to appear almost a solid, mottle chocolate. When I checked the nest again on 20 May, it contained only 3 eggs. There was no evidence of the missing egg in or under the nest, so there was no explanation for its disappearance. On 2 June, there was 1 egg which failed to hatch and 2 large, downy young, A young bird flew from the nest when I climbed the tree. The female was very aggressive and made several diving attacks from the rear, narrowly missing my head. The male was not seen or heard in the vicinity of the nest after 29 April.

The complete nesting cycle required about 100 days or 14 weeks, from 25 March, when nest construction first started, until 2 July, when the last of the 2 young flew from the nest.

A third nest was found on 21 April 1986 in the Chocolocco Wildlife Management Area in Talladega National Forest, about 3 miles from the 1967 nest. I was first alerted to Sharp-shinneds in the area by their soft piping notes, coming from a Virginia Pine (Pinus virginiana) thicket I saw a female Sharp-shinned through the thicket as she flew up on a limb about 17 meters in front of me. She was nervous and moved her head from side to side in an effort to get a better view of me through the trees. After about 5 minutes she dropped from her perch and flew straight at me, wings set, threading her way through the thicket. At the last second she flared a foot in front of my head and lit on a limb about 3 meters over me, peering down intently. She remained there looking at me for about half a minute then flew off into the woods.

A search of the area revealed the nest on the edge of the pine thicket and on top of a ridge. The nest, like the other 2 described, was a bulky but compact structure of small twigs placed about 7 meters above the ground against the trunk of a very rough Virginia pine. The ridge formed a dividing line between the dense pine thicket and a relatively open area about one-eigth ha in size on the other side. The entire area had been burned over the previous winter killing the second growth hardwoods and some of the pines.

I returned on 25 April and observed the pair for about an hour as they broke off twigs with their beaks and carried them back to the nest. On 4 May the female appeared to be incubating but the male was still busy snapping off twigs and taking them to the nest. The female would occasionally leave the nest and fly off a short distance to break off a twig and carry it back to the nest. On 9 May I returned to climb the tree and check the contents of the nest. As with the other 2 nests described, the female did not flush until I started climbing the tree. She called from the thicket but did not attack. The nest contained 4 dull whitish to pale bluish eggs, all heavily

blotched with reddish brown, chestnut and chocolate and similar to those already described from the other 2 nests.

The nest was constructed entirely of small twigs neatly and compactly interwoven and measured approximately 45 centimeters across. The floor of the nest was slightly saucer shaped and composed of smaller twigs. As in the other two nests, there was no lining. Some down was clinging to the rim and nest cup, a tell-tale sign that a nest is in use.

On 10 June the nest held 4 small, downy young barely strong enough to hold their heads up. I judged them to be only 2 or 3 days old. This estimate would be about right assuming the female was on eggs on 4 May as she appeared to be. Newton (1979) lists the incubation period for Sharp-shinned Hawks as 31-34 days, in which case the young on 10 June would be 2 to 5 days old.

On 5 July two of the fleglings were perched on a limb about 1 meter from the nest. The other 2 were not seen and had apparently fledged. The female flew about calling in defiance but did not attack. The male was not seen on any of my visits after 4 May, about the time that incubation began. This was also the case with the other two nests described. Pictures were taken of the nest and eggs but none were obtained of the nestings.

Pellets, bone fragments, skulls and feathers were collected from the nest and from under the tree and sent to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., where they were identified by Roxie Laybourne and Beth Ann Gilroy of the Fish and Wildlife Service. The feathers were identified as those of a Wren (Thryothorus ludoviciana), Yellow-billed Cuckoo (Coccyzus americana), Tufted Titmouse (Parus bicolor), Meadowlark (Sturnella magna), Indigo Bunting (Passerina cyanea), and Field Sparrow (Passerina pusilla). The skeletal parts of two Yellow-billed Cuckoos and the skulls from a Carolina Chickadee (Parus carolinensis), Carolina Wren and Field Sparrow. The remains of one long-horned grasshopper were also collected from the nest.

Summary

Sharp-shinned Hawks have been recorded over the entire state during the summer months and probably nest wherever they occur during the breeding season from March through July. They appear to be fairly common wherever extensively forested areas of suitable habitat exist.

The first positive breeding record for Alabama was a nest containing 2 eggs found by the author near Auburn in Lee County on 25 April 1954. Two other active nests have since been found, both in Cleburne County.

All 3 of the nests were in forested areas, but there was no pattern as to the selection of nesting sites or to the nesting site in relation to woodland "corridors," or roads.

All 3 of the nests were compact structures of twigs placed against the trunks of pines growing in pine thickets or mixed pine-hardwood forests. The nests were rather low, between 7 and 10 meters above the ground.

Both sexes shared in nest construction, but the male seemed to have the most active role. All of the twigs were gathered by the birds snapping them off with their beaks from limbs in the immediate vicinity of the nest. Nest construction required about 25 days. The 3 nests observed by the author had no lining.

The first nest found by the author on 25 April 1954 contained an incomplete set of two eggs. The other 2 nests held 4 eggs each. In one of these, 1 egg did not hatch and another disappared without explanation. The eggs were highly variable in color, ranging from dull white to bluish-gray, boldly and heavily blotched with reddish brown, chestnut, and chocolate.

Egg dates were from 19 April to 20 May but eggs were no doubt in one of the nests into the first week of June since the nest held young only a few days old on 10 June. Young were in the nests from late May through 5 July.

Acknowledgments

I am appreciative for the identification of prey remains provided by Roxie Laybourne and Beth Ann Gilroy of the Fish and Wildlife Service and to Randy Liles, Manager of the Chocolocco Wildlife Management Area, for his time and help in photographing one of the nests located on the management area.

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Bill Summerour
Jacksonville State University
Jacksonville, AL

Request for Assistance - As part of a species restoration project in north Alabama, 122 great white egrets (Egretta alba) have been "hacked" near Guntersville Reservoir. Each egret is marked with a 2-inch red flag attached to a FWS leg band. Sightings should be reported to:

Burline Pullin
Wildlife Resources Develoment Program
Tennessee Valley Authority
Norris, Tennessee 37828
Telephone: (615) 632-1642.

Please note number and location of egrets and the date of observations.