

Note

Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) Attacks Waterbirds at Sea

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Gaston, Anthony J. 2016. Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) attacks waterbirds at sea. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 130(1): 38–39.

A Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) was twice observed hunting over the sea, close to shore, for small grebes (*Podiceps* spp.). Neither predation attempt was successful. Attacks on marine birds on the sea by goshawks are very rarely reported.

Key Words: Northern Goshawk; *Accipiter gentilis*; grebe; *Podiceps*; predation

The Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) is primarily a forest-living raptor, feeding on birds and mammals up to the size of grouse and rabbits (Cramp and Simmons 1980; Widen 1989; Squires and Reynolds 1997; Drennan 2006). It is not often seen in open country and rarely in waterside habitats (Cramp and Simmons 1980; Squires and Reynolds 1997). Although goshawks sometimes prey on waterbirds on land (Schnurre 1956; Veldkamp 2008; Verdal and Selås 2010), published observations of predation by Northern Goshawks on birds on water are unusual (Sulkava *et al.* 2006; Magyar 2011), and predation attempts on the sea have not been described previously. This note reports two predation attempts on waterbirds on the sea.

On 3 February 2015 at 1000, an immature, probably female based on size (Figure 1), Northern Goshawk was seen swooping low over an Eared Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*) on the sea about 20 m from shore off the north coast of Gabriola Island, British Columbia. The grebe dived to avoid capture, but the goshawk circled over the spot and made a second attempt as the bird resurfaced, plunging into the water with its talons spread and “spread-eagling” on the surface briefly before rising from the water. The grebe again avoided capture by diving and the goshawk, now with wet belly, primary, and tail feathers, flapped to shore and sat on a rock with wings spread. After 4 minutes of intermittent preening it flew off into the nearby forest.

Flocks of about 50 Barrow’s Goldeneye (*Bucephala islandica*) and about 500 Surf Scoters (*Melanitta perspicillata*), which were feeding about 100 m away from the goshawk attack, responded to the event by vocalizing, huddling together, and swimming quickly toward the attack location, approaching to within 30 m of the spot where they remained for 3 minutes before they resumed feeding.

On 7 February 2015, about 400 m west of the first observation site, an immature Northern Goshawk was seen



FIGURE 1. Immature Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) on the shore at Gabriola Island, British Columbia, February 2015, after failing in a predation attempt on an Eared Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*). Photo: A. J. Gaston.

flying about 1 m above the sea toward a Horned Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*) sitting on the water surface about 50 m offshore. The goshawk extended its feet forward as it came level with the grebe, but the grebe dived and the goshawk pulled out of its swoop before making contact with the sea surface. It then continued flying at the same altitude and landed on a rock close to the shore, where it sat for another 5 minutes before observations ceased. The distance from the goshawk’s take-off point to the intended prey was about 100 m. Scattered American Wigeon (*Anas americana*) and Common Mergansers (*Mergus merganser*) on the water within 100 m of the grebe showed no reaction to the hawk, but a female Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*) within 15 m of the hawk’s course dived underwater although the goshawk made no attempt to approach it.

The behaviour of the goshawk on both occasions clearly indicated intended predation, especially in the

A contribution towards the cost of this publication has been provided by the Thomas Manning Memorial Fund of the Ottawa Field-Naturalists’ Club.

first instance, where the bird plunged into the sea up to its belly. However, neither attempt was successful. In both instances, the target birds were the smallest among many waterbirds present and, in both cases, the sea was only slightly rippled. The two observations involved a bird in identical plumage and, given the proximity of the two sites, could easily have been the same individual.

Although ducks, gulls, and other waterbirds have been noted among the prey of Northern Goshawks in northwestern North America (Drennan 2006), no predation at sea has been reported. A record of a Pigeon Guillemot (*Cephus columba*) among goshawk prey in southeast Alaska (Lewis *et al.* 2006) was probably taken on the sea, as these birds breed very close to shore and are not found on fresh water (Squires and Reynolds 1997). However, the possibility that it was taken on land near the nest cannot be excluded.

In the current observations, the goshawk hunted close to shore in sheltered waters with little wave action. For-est extended to within 50 m of the shoreline in both cases. It seems likely that the attacks were initiated from the shelter of trees, but, in both instances, the action was not seen until the goshawk was over the sea. The distance from take-off to prey noted during the second predation attempt was considerably farther than is typically attended by success in the species (Kenward 1978). As the bird involved was an immature, it is likely that these predation attempts were part of a learning process that would eventually result in concentration on more typical prey (Frank Doyle, personal communication, March 2015).

Acknowledgements

I thank Jeff Rietkerk for comments on the occurrence of goshawks on Gabriola Island and Dick Cannings, Frank Doyle of Wildlife Dynamics, BC, and three anonymous referees for comments on goshawk behaviour elsewhere in British Columbia.

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Received 27 May 2015

Accepted 6 December 2015