

SPECIES OF THE WEEK



Sparrowhawk

Accipiter nisus

Spioróg

The Eurasian Sparrowhawk is a small bird of prey with a huge distribution throughout Europe and Asia. Native to Ireland, it has a wide range across the country although not as common in the West. The population increases during the winter when resident birds are joined by birds from Europe looking to escape the harsher winter on the continent.

Males have grey bluish upper parts with a reddy brown barring pattern on their white underside. The female is browner with a darker barring pattern on their underside. An adult can grow from roughly 30cm to 40cm long with the females considerably larger than the males. Their short, blunt wings and long tail make them highly manoeuvrable when hunting their prey, which is usually small woodland birds. The sparrowhawk is built for low flying and tight turns and spaces. They will lie low and wait for a potential meal to fly by, during which they will shoot out for a surprise attack. They try to fly low to the ground and remain undetected for as long as possible before they strike using bushes, trees and hedges for cover. Only one in ten attacks is successful.

Predation is an important biological process in nature and our environment would be a very different place without it. Predators like the sparrowhawk carry out a number of valuable ecosystem services simply by feeding. One such service is the picking off of the old and sick animals of a population. Predation is a major driving force of natural selection on both prey and predators alike. The sparrowhawk needs to be very fast and agile to catch a robin, that means that the sparrowhawks that are not fast and agile won't survive. Likewise the robin needs to react fast and be alert in case it gets attacked, the robins that aren't careful won't survive. The animals that can survive long enough to reproduce will pass on their genes to the next generation. This is what evolution by natural selection is all about.