



LEFT - POLLY PULLAR

## An eye on the prize

A unique wildlife project is under way at Edinburgh's Royal Botanic Gardens, where cameras hidden in sparrowhawks' nests are giving a precious insight into a bird that was once as much prey as predator

WORDS POLLY PULLAR

I am daydreaming in the garden on a warm May morning when a whooshing sound right over my head, followed by a flurry of feathers like snowflakes, wakes me from my reverie. A hen sparrowhawk is now on the bird table and is plucking a great tit with gusto right in front of me. This is a common sight in gardens across Scotland. Green spaces, even in urban areas, provide a perfect habitat for these

raptors where they can find plentiful prey.

Though most of us would rather not witness the sparrowhawk's bloody activities right before our eyes, the fact that it happens at all should be cause for celebration as it's an example of a thriving ecosystem. The sparrowhawk is a wonderful indicator of the biodiversity of the surrounding environment, showing that we have healthy populations of songbirds.

Like many birds of prey, the sparrowhawk has had mixed fortunes. For at least 150 years it suffered intense persecution. Loathed by game-keepers everywhere, it was shot, poisoned and trapped relentlessly in order to protect grouse, partridges and pheasants. Nowadays, it is once again becoming a fairly common sight, though it will probably never reach the numbers that existed when Scotland was intensely wooded.

The sparrowhawk is a beautiful bird with piercing orange or yellow eyes depending on age or sex. 'It gives an impression of nervous tension and capacity for sudden swift movement unequalled in any other small raptor,' according to Leslie Brown's *British Birds of Prey*. This nervous edginess is one of many ways in which the sparrowhawk is unique.

With their short wings, they fly in a dashing manner, often at low level, flitting along hedgerows and through trees with astonishing manoeuvrability. Their hunting skills include aerial agility as well as stealth. The female is a third bigger than her mate, and though most prey consists of garden birds, she can take prey as large as an adult wood pigeon.

Edinburgh's Royal Botanic Gardens may seem an unlikely place to be watching footage of a carrion crow attacking a nesting sparrowhawk. But thanks to an exciting new partnership between the Botanics, the RSPB, Lothian and Borders Raptor Study Group, and the Scottish Seabird Centre, a camera was placed in a sparrowhawk nest in the garden. Live footage can be seen at the Botanics' John Hope Gateway and at the Scottish Seabird Centre in North Berwick.

It was only 24 hours after the camera had gone live that the crow appeared and attacked the clutch of five eggs. The pair of sparrowhawks failed to rear any young that season. It is believed that the female died soon after, having been injured during the crow's attack.

It was a clear example of the predator becom-

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**Left:** The sparrowhawk is one of our smaller raptors but that doesn't stop the females being able to take prey as large as an adult wood pigeon.



‘They flit along hedgerows and through trees with astonishing manoeuvrability, and their hunting skills include aerial agility as well as stealth’



ing prey and sufficient evidence to dispel all doubt that this kind of incident does happen. The footage of the crow attack appeared on the BBC's *Spring Watch* to illustrate just some of the many complexities of the natural world, and showed that in the wild nothing should be taken for granted.

The good news is that Edinburgh's Botanic Gardens are rich in wildlife. As well as being home to badgers, foxes, squirrels and a huge variety of birds, including kingfishers, it is also perfect sparrowhawk habitat. So it didn't take long before the team were able to locate another nesting pair and the camera was relocated. Footage throughout the rest of last year's breeding season revealed the private lives of the sparrowhawks as they successfully went on to rear six healthy chicks. These were ringed and monitored and all six eventually dispersed.

This year, due to its popularity and importance as an educational tool, the project is running again, and a camera in another nest within the gardens is currently in place. Claire Powell, an RSPB information officer, will be on hand to explain the activities at the nest for an interactive event called A Date With Nature.

Mike Thornton, a member of the Lothian and Borders Raptor Study Group, is largely responsible for the idea of the camera at the Botanics. Since 2009, a team of volunteers has been studying some 50 historical territories within Edinburgh, repeating a survey carried

out in the 1980s. The Raptor Group is gathering data on breeding occupancy numbers and productivity, and moulted female feathers are being collected to estimate breeding turnover.

One aim of the RSPB's Date with Nature Project at the Botanics is to develop public awareness and to dispel the myths surrounding raptors in general. 'We want to challenge the views some people have of raptors,' says Mike Thornton. 'While they accept that lions prey on antelopes and otters prey on fish, the fact that sparrowhawks and other birds of prey eat songbirds strikes them as unacceptable.'

The project is indeed thought-provoking and gives people the opportunity to learn about the biology and ecology of a bird they may never have the chance to view in this way. Many people don't realise that these birds are there at all or that they can successfully exist in close proximity to us. The public are encouraged to participate by recording their day-to-day sightings on the Edinburgh Hawk Watch website.

In the future, it is hoped that it will be possible to view other urban raptors too, such as tawny and barn owls, buzzards, peregrines and kestrels. For now, it seems that the fortunes of another pair of breeding Edinburgh sparrowhawks can be viewed this season in households all over the country. It should beat any soap opera hands down. ☺



**Left:** The sparrowhawk was once the mortal enemy of gamekeepers everywhere thanks to its attacks on grouse and pheasants. **Top:** A sparrowhawk closes in on its prey.

**Above:** A chick is ringed as part of a conservation study.

## FIELDFACTS

To learn more about the birds of prey that inhabit Edinburgh, see

[www.edinburghhawkwatch.org.uk](http://www.edinburghhawkwatch.org.uk)

For details of the Date with Nature Project, see

[www.rspb.org.uk/datewithnature/278092-edinburgh-sparrowhawks](http://www.rspb.org.uk/datewithnature/278092-edinburgh-sparrowhawks)

