

# Goshawks in Norfolk - some identification pointers to separate from Sparrowhawk

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## Background

In the early eighties, Goshawk was a rare bird in the county with just a handful of pairs in the Norfolk/Suffolk Brecks and with virtually all records/sightings coming from just one or two sites. In the four decades since, Goshawks have become much more widespread and while Breckland remains the bird's Norfolk stronghold, it can now be encountered across much of the county at any time of the year (although it should be noted that it still remains rare in the east).

As a result, the Norfolk Records Committee has decided that from January 1st 2022 descriptions will be required only for coastal Goshawk sightings. All other records of Goshawk can now be submitted in the normal way via monthly, quarterly or annual submissions to the County Recorder without the need for a formal description.

However, because of the high proportion of 'not proven' decisions for this species in previous years (around 45%) the intention of this note is to provide some useful pointers to identify Goshawk and to separate it from Sparrowhawk.

Many thousands of words have already been written in various books, journals and magazines by acknowledged experts in the field of raptor identification, usually illustrated with full-frame, pin-sharp photographs to accompany the text. While these are hugely instructive and provide a wealth of information around identification, ageing, sexing, plumage and moult, the photographs tend not to reflect the reality of most Goshawk sightings which are often brief and distant (or both!). To address this, the photographs (which were all taken in the county) have been chosen to illustrate the typical views which most observers are likely to get in the field.

## Flight and Jizz

When confronted by a potential Goshawk sighting, for many, the initial thoughts are often along the lines of 'it's like a Sparrowhawk but bigger'. However, while Goshawks are larger than Sparrowhawks they also have a set of structural and plumage features which in combination should allow a correct identification to be made in most instances.

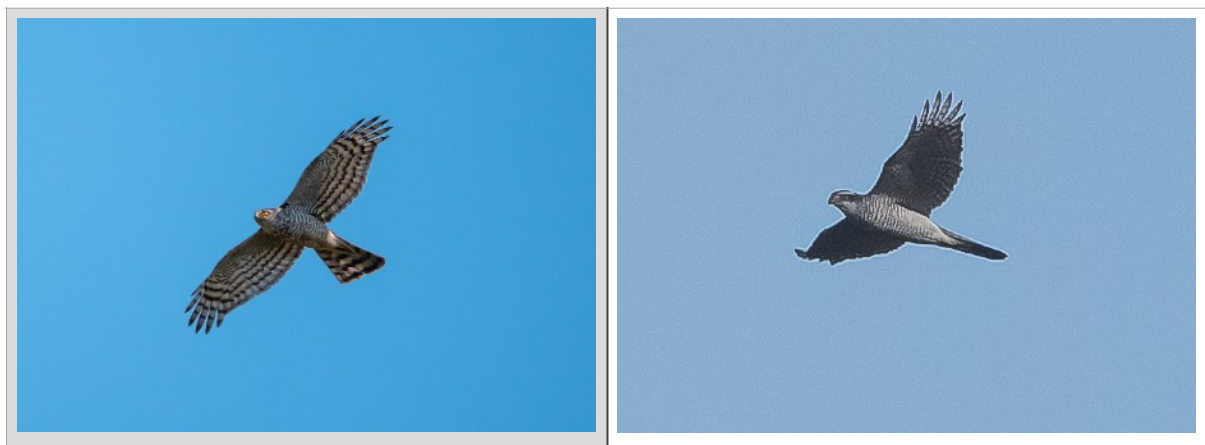
As well as the structural and plumage differences detailed in this note, the flight action is often the first indication that the accipiter being watched is a Goshawk rather than a Sparrowhawk, especially on distant birds. Whereas Sparrowhawks normal flight action is a short series of short, 'snappy' wing beats followed by a relatively short glide, the wing beats of Goshawks always look deeper and slower giving the appearance of a much more powerful bird and the subsequent glide tends to be much longer. These differences are especially apparent during the breeding season when both species indulge in prolonged display flights over the forest canopy. Also, a feature of soaring Sparrowhawks is that they they tend to pull tight spirals whereas Goshawks, being larger birds, appear much more relaxed and move in much wider spirals when circling.

A brief summary of the differences between Sparrowhawk and Goshawk is shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

Sparrowhawk	Goshawk
Small to medium size raptor, potentially only confusable with Goshawk	Medium to large raptor potentially confusable with Sparrowhawk, Common Buzzard, Hen/Marsh Harrier, Peregrine or even Honey Buzzard!.
Small head and bill	Heavy head and large bill
Short neck	Long neck
Relatively slim bodied	Heavy, barrel-chested look
Relatively slim, 'lollipop-stick', square-ended tail	Broad, round-cornered tail, merging into 'hips'.
In most instances, wing appears rounded with arm and hand a similar width	Bulging secondaries (especially juv/2CY birds) with a narrower hand, often appearing falcon-like

Figure 1 below shows some of the features listed above.



**Figure 1**

## Size and Structure

While there are distinct plumage differences between Sparrowhawk and Goshawk the key to correct identification in most instances will be size and structure.

Female Goshawks are big birds! Always useful to have other birds for reference but as well as massive size difference, Figure 2 also shows the ‘small head/short neck’ of Sparrowhawk compared large head/long neck of Goshawk.

Also, although not easy to see in the photograph, Sparrowhawk has a relatively slim ‘lollipop stick’ stuck-on tail whereas Goshawk tail is much more robust and tends to merge seamlessly into the body. It is worth pointing out that large female Sparrowhawks can approach male Goshawks in size and watching the slow, ‘butterfly’ display of a female Sparrowhawk in spring can give the illusion of a much larger bird. Such birds, when also showing ‘wrap round’ undertail coverts, can easily give the impression of a displaying male Goshawk but a reasonable view should allow a correct identification to be made based on the characteristics outlined below.



**Figure 2.** Male Sparrowhawk and female Goshawk (Feb 2020)

Although there is some variation in the size of individual birds of both sexes, female Goshawk is usually an equal match for Common Buzzard. Also, as can be seen in Figure 3 below, from certain angles, the wings can appear falcon-like with a relatively pointed ‘hand’. Round-cornered tail also shows nicely as does the way it merges seamlessly into the ‘hips’ of the lower body.



**Figure 3.** Common Buzzard with 2CY female Goshawk (March 2019)

Goshawks of both sexes can often be identified from their structure alone. Figure 4 below shows various Goshawks in the Brecks of different ages and sexes with key features to separate from Sparrowhawk including:

- \* Barrel-chested look (but beware of large female Sparrowhawks with a full crop).
- \* Heavy, protruding head and large-billed
- \* Long neck
- \* Bulging secondaries (more pronounced on juv/2CY birds)
- \* Relatively narrow, almost pointed 'hand' from certain angles.
- \* Robust, round-cornered tail merging seamlessly into 'hips'. Some Sparrowhawks may show a round-cornered tail when in moult and when outer tail feathers are still growing but usually will show a relatively square-cut, 'stuck on' tail.



Figure 4

## Plumage

### *Juvenile/2CY*

A feature of juvenile and 2CY Goshawks is the bold, 'tear-drop' spotting on the breast. However, on flying birds this feature is usually not discernible. Instead, the spotting appears as coarse, dark streaking against a buffish ground colour which also extends on to the underwing coverts (Figures 5, 6 and 7).



**Figures 5 and 6. 2CY female Goshawk (March 2021)**





**Figure 7.** 2CY Goshawk (April 2020, blue plastic ring indicating a Breckland-bred bird)

All show the distinctive secondary bulge which is more pronounced in juvenile and 2CY birds. Also, while Sparrowhawks often spread their tail when soaring, Figure 7 shows that Goshawk has a much broader and more robust tail than that species.

In the field, most views tend to be of the underparts but a feature of juvenile and 2CY Goshawks are the extensive pale tips to coverts and upper wing feathering which can be surprisingly obvious even at long range sometimes producing a mottled almost 'moth-eaten' effect (Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** 2CY Goshawk (March 2020)

3CY

3CY birds are usually identifiable as ‘half-way’ between juvenile and adult plumages. Figure 9 shows a 3CY female where the body streaking has become coarse barring on a pale background while the upperparts are relatively plain brown/grey, lacking the pale fringing/mottling of juv/2CY birds.



**Figure 9.** 3CY female Goshawk (May 2020).

Of interest, the bird in Figure 9 was uncharacteristically quartering low over rough grassland and on the initial brief view I thought it was going to be a harrier!



**Figure 10.** 3CY male Goshawk (February 2020)



Figure 10 also shows the coarse barring characteristic of 3CY birds.

### *Adult*

Adult Goshawks are distinctive birds. Figure 11 shows an adult male with the most obvious features being white underparts and very fine, almost peregrine-like, barring on the body extending to the underwing coverts. In bright sunlight, and at distance, the fine barring can disappear resulting in the underparts appearing shining white (Figure 12). Also noticeable is the dark 'hood' and broad, white supercilium. Upperparts tend to be a uniform grey-brown.



**Figure 11.** Adult male Goshawk (January 2020)



**Figure 12.** Adult male Goshawk and 2CY female (January 2021)

However, at a distance and at certain angles the supercilium can be difficult to see and some birds can appear to have a solid, peregrine-like hood but with reasonable views the other diagnostic features should be sufficient to clinch the identification (Figure 13).



**Figure 13.** Adult Goshawk (March 2020)

Finally, it should be said that sometimes views can be so brief and/or distant that it may not be possible to identify to species and worth noting that if you're 'not sure' then the chances are it wasn't a Goshawk!