

## Is That Hawk a Threat to my Pet?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I regularly have to visit social media and debunk myths about the threat of hawks to pets. I don't know how many times someone has shown a photo of some hawk that they saw in their neighborhood and they are all in a panic because someone's second cousin's neighbor had a Saint Bernard snatched by an eagle and blah, blah, blah. Yes, I exaggerate maybe just a little, about the St. Bernard, but I routinely field questions about potential threats to pets by birds of prey. I have been a pet owner. I know the angst and concern about the well being of your pet. But let's start by putting all those urban myths to rest and understand a little bit more about that perceived threat to your pet known as a hawk.

Let's start by lumping hawks and eagles and owls together as birds of prey. Anytime that I mention hawk, it applies to all of these. While hawks are generally considered "meat eaters" be aware that virtually each and every species has very specific food preferences. Some are bird eaters, most are small rodent eaters, some prefer grasshoppers and other large insects and some really relish snakes. Cats and dogs are not going to be high on most hawks list of preferred food sources.

First some biological realities. Birds of prey can only carry away in flight about 40% of their own body weight, 50% maximum. Some species can kill individuals larger than that, but they can't carry them away. Most of the time they are focusing on food sources one fourth their own size or smaller. Putting that into perspective, our largest bird of prey in this area is going to be the Bald Eagle with an average weight of ten pounds. On a good day, a Bald Eagle could carry off something that weighs four or five pounds. A Bald Eagle is far more likely to focus on fish, ducks or a road kill deer. A pet in your backyard is not likely to draw it's attention. If it is flying over your house it's en route to someplace else or there just happens to be a good thermal for it to fly in.

Now let's get down to the species you are most likely going to see in your yard. The two common hawks we see at our bird feeders are the Sharp-shinned Hawk and the Cooper's Hawk. These species feed on small birds over 80% of the time. Additionally, a Cooper's Hawk, the larger of the two, will weigh in right at one pound. A majority of their food weighs between one and five ounces. Neither of these species are going to tangle with even a small cat or dog.

We may also see Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks in town. These two species average weight is 1.4 and 2.4 pounds respectively. They may take a glance at a small dog or cat but they'd have to be pretty hard up to go after one. Red-shouldered Hawks prefer small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians as food sources. Small mammals does not mean cats, it means mice, voles and other small rodents. Red-tailed Hawks are a larger species and will take prey up to the size of a rabbit. But Red-tailed Hawks are not going to be overly abundant in town - more a species of rural settings. A Great Horned Owl can be up to 3.3 pounds and is known to take cats and skunks, eating them where they kill them. If you are keeping your cat indoors, as you should, then they aren't at risk.

Bottom line here is that your pets are more at risk of vehicles and things like coyotes and foxes than they are of birds of prey. Don't believe the urban myth stories of even medium sized dogs being attacked and carried off. Be a responsible pet owner, keep your pets in your house or under you watch and they will live longer and happier lives with far less risk of any kind!