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# Short communications

## Sparrowhawk killed by its prey

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Catching large prey may provide a predator with large meals, but may yield a less than optimal return rate due to long handling time which may make the prey susceptible to competitors and scavengers (Newton 1986). In some cases, large prey may even be risky to the predator. One such case was observed at the outskirts of Bergen, Norway, on 29 March 2006, when a Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) captured a Magpie (*Pica pica*).

Attention was called to the incident, which took place in a steep alder and birch covered slope along a row of houses, by a flock of about 15 highly agitated Hooded Crows (*Corvus cornix*) giving raucous calls from the treetops in the afternoon at 18:30. The hawk and the Magpie were seen as a struggling bundle on the forest floor. After a few minutes the birds moved only little, the hawk seeming to have a tight grip on the Magpie. Violent struggle, however, ensued after another 10 minutes, leading to the birds moving about 50 m along the slope, the Magpie still in the grip of the hawk. Again they lay still, the hawk more or less covering the Magpie. From their position the two birds now lent themselves to an excellent view through 10x binoculars at about 50 m distance. The hawk repeatedly thrust its grip with its right talon into the Magpie, and with its beak now and then ripping feathers off its prey. The Magpie on the other hand, most of its head more or less covered in the ventral feathers of the hawk, seemed to attempt to stab or bite. The

hawk's left leg did not hold on to the Magpie but pointed stiffly backwards along the tail feathers, an indication that the hawk was injured.

The flock of crows, still vocalizing loudly, had followed in the treetops to above the new position of the hawk. The captured Magpie gave faint squeaking calls, and three Magpies appeared and cautiously approached the hawk, calling loudly. One of the Magpies, apparently a large male, hopped up behind the hawk, pecked at it, and twice pulled it by its tail feathers. This caused no reaction from the hawk. After about 6 minutes, the three Magpies left and disappeared.

As the hawk tried to shift its grip at 19:06, the Magpie, still squeaking, responded by stemming its right foot against the face of the hawk. The birds tumbled half a metre further down the slope and came to a rest in an awkward position. After 20 minutes they flapped and rolled another metre, stopping as the hawk was caught half hanging from its wings that appeared to be entangled among some twigs sticking up from the ground. By this, an opening was created underneath the hawk, and after 8 minutes the Magpie managed to slip slowly away from the hawk, which now looked completely exhausted. The Magpie crept a metre away, sat for a while motionless, then started to hammer the ground vigorously with its beak.

Upon my approach, the hawk made no attempt to escape, whereas the Magpie, now about 10 metres further up the slope, took flight

and disappeared. The hawk was left for about an hour, after which it was found to have died. Dissection showed a hole with a diameter of about 7 mm through the hawk's back at the posterior end of the left scapula (Fig. 1A), extending into the hawk's left lung, which showed an effusion of blood. The hawk's left tibia was broken just below the heel joint (Fig. 1B), and the left underarm muscles were severely bruised, showing blood effusion beneath the skin.

The Sparrowhawk proved to be an adult female in fairly poor condition, having a total length of 355 mm, a wing length of 238 mm, and weighing only 222 g. The bird had no layer of subcutaneous fat and the pectoral muscles were only moderately convex. Average late winter weights of female Scottish Sparrowhawks are close to 280 g (Newton 1986). From its general size and well developed tail feathers, the Magpie was judged to be a male.

Primarily a predator on birds, the Sparrowhawk shows a long list of prey species, the bulk, however, being within the size spectrum of smaller to medium sized passerines, (from songbirds, tits, and sparrows to thrushes; e.g., Hagen 1952, Cramp & Simmons 1980, Newton 1986, Selås 1993, Götmark & Post 1966). Yet birds larger than the raptor itself sometimes are reported from Sparrowhawk food studies (e.g., Columbiformes; Charadriiformes as large as Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* and Curlew *Numenius arquata*; Phasianidae), and in Britain Woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus*), about twice as heavy as a female Sparrowhawk (Cramp 1985), may make up 6 % of Sparrowhawk prey by numbers and as much as 34% by weight (Newton 1986). Being an abundant and conspicuous species within much of the Sparrowhawk's range and habitat, and with a weight of about 200-250 g (Cramp & Perrins 1994), Magpies should make an attractive prey species to Sparrowhawks. Yet Magpies and other corvids are scarce on prey lists of this raptor. Among 532 prey animals from Norwegian Sparrowhawks Hagen (1952) found only three Magpies, and at least two of these had been caught by Sparrowhawk females. The present observation shows that preying upon a

large corvid such as the Magpie may pose a lethal risk even to an adult female Sparrowhawk.

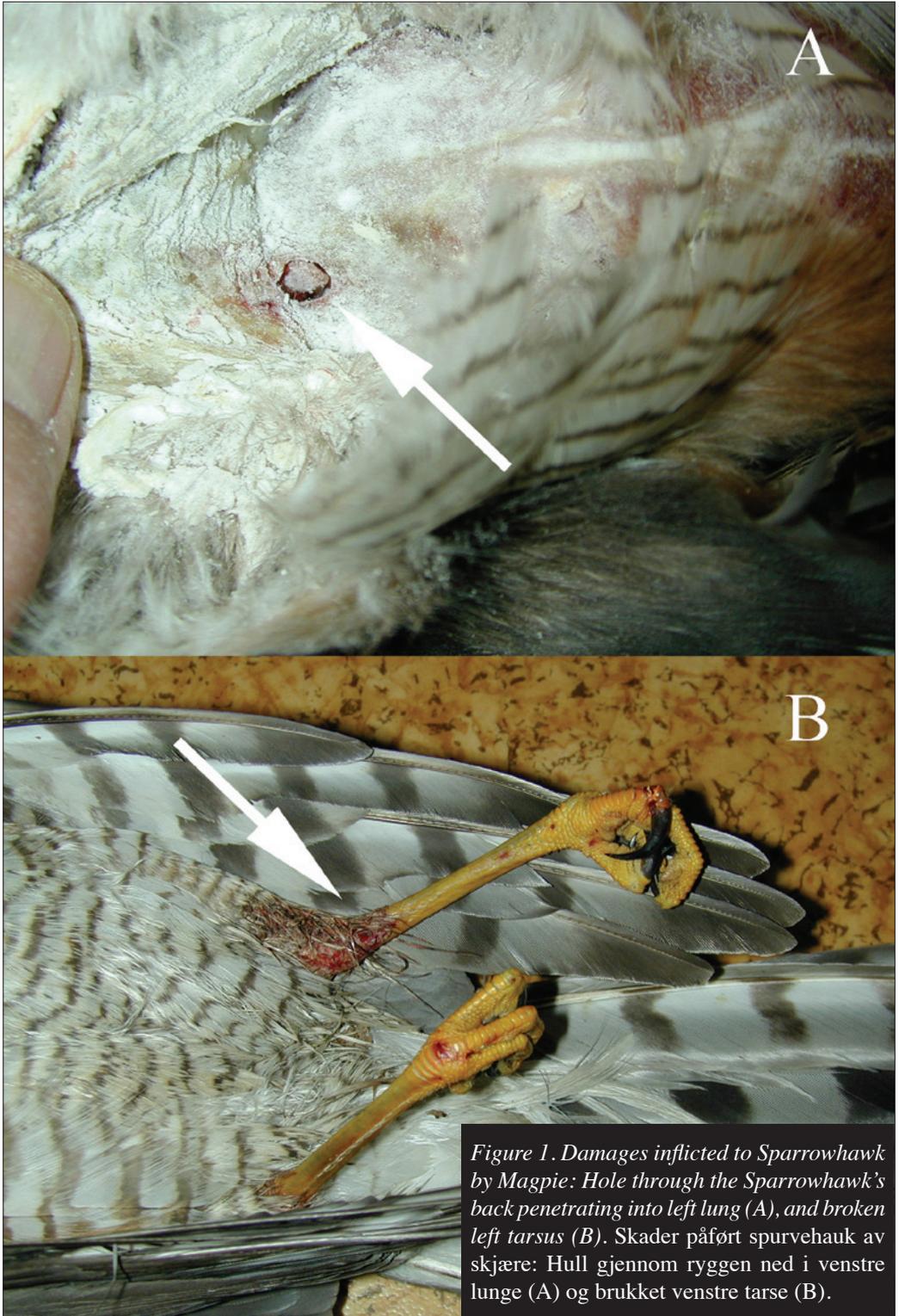
## SAMMENDRAG

### Spurvehawk drept av sitt eget bytte

Den 29. mars 2006 utenfor Bergen tok en adult spurvehawk hunn ei skjæra (sannsynligvis hann), men måtte selv bøte med livet på grunn av skadene skjæra påførte den. Kampen mellom de to pågikk i over en time før skjæra klarte å komme seg vekk fra spurvehaukens klør. Spurvehauken var da helt ukjørt og døde i løpet av neste time. Det viste seg at spurvehauken, som var i forholdsvis mager stand, hadde fått et hull hakket gjennom ryggen sin og ned i venstre lunge, dens venstre tars var brukket og venstre underarmsmuskulatur var kraftig skadet med store bloduttredelser under huden. Spurvehauken er kjent for å kunne ta relativt stort bytte. I Storbritannia inngår f.eks. ringdue ikke sjelden i dietten. Skjærer og andre kråkefugl tas derimot bare unntaksvis. Ut fra skjærenes tallrikhet skulle en vente at de oftere burde inngå i spurvehaukens føde, men denne observasjonen viser at skjæra kan være et risikabelt bytte for en spurvehawk.

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*Figure 1. Damages inflicted to Sparrowhawk by Magpie: Hole through the Sparrowhawk's back penetrating into left lung (A), and broken left tarsus (B). Skader påført spurvehawk av skjære: Hull gjennom ryggen ned i venstre lunge (A) og brukket venstre tarse (B).*