

Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey



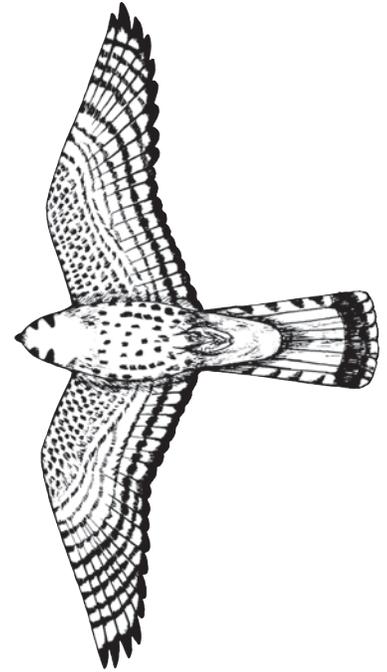
National Conservation Area

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*)

Description/Size

Wing span: 20-24 inches
Length: 8-11 inches
Weight: 3.4 to 5.3 ounces

The smallest falcon in North America. Like all falcons, kestrels have large heads, notched beaks, and “heavy shouldered” streamlined bodies. There is a difference in the plumage of each sex. In both sexes the back is reddish brown sparsely barred with black, the crown is blue-gray with variable amounts of rufous, the face and throat are white with a black malar (vertical stripe) below the dark eyes and another behind the cheek, the beak is blue-black and the legs and feet are yellow. Male kestrels have blue-gray wings, while females have reddish-brown wings with black barring. Males have rufous tails with one wide, black sub-terminal band and a white tip. Females have rufous tails and many black bars. The light-colored under parts of females typically are heavily streaked with brown; those of males are white to buffy orange with variable amounts of dark spotting or streaking. This adult plumage is attained at 1 year. Both sexes are slightly larger than robins but females are 10-15% larger than males.



Similar Species

Merlin – similar sized falcon but not as colorful; both sexes have narrow pale bands on a dark tail.

Habitat/Range

North America, the Bahamas and Antilles, Central America, and South America. Frequents open and partially open countryside including agriculture lands, transportation corridors such as freeways and highways, meadows, prairies, plains, and deserts.



Food/Diet

Primarily a sit and wait perch hunter-most prey is caught on the ground but some are taken in flight. Kestrels catch prey with their feet and then administer a killing bite to the back of the head. They capture a variety of prey but insects are the primary prey followed by small mammals, birds, small reptiles and some amphibians. Insects include grasshoppers, dragonflies, and crickets. Birds include meadowlarks, quail, wrens, and starlings. Reptiles include small lizards and snakes. Foods only rarely taken include centipedes, scorpions, spiders, snails, and earthworms. Occasionally takes bats. Kestrel will kill and cache food items – highest in fall and winter.

Voice

The American kestrel has three basic vocalizations. A shrill, clear screaming *kli kli kli kli kli kli*, *kli kli* is used when upset or excited. A whine is used during courtship feeding and copulation. A chitter is the most frequent vocalization in male/female interactions.

Behavior

American kestrels are aggressive vocal birds. Wing beats are weak and shallow; flight is light and buoyant. Occasionally soars in circles with its tail spread and its wings flat.

The American kestrel is often seen hovering or perched on wires in open areas, hunting insects and small mammals. When perched, it commonly bobs its tail up and down. It is the only North American falcon to hunt by hovering. Northern populations in North America are more migratory than those breeding farther south. This results in a leap-frog pattern of migration in which northern birds winter south of southern birds. Some northern populations move as far south as Central America, while many southern populations are sedentary. Most American kestrels breeding in North America overwinter in the US.

Reproduction/Nesting

Clutch size: 4 to 6 eggs
Eggs: white with flecks of brown shades; elliptical, 1.3 x 1 inches
Incubation: 28-29 days
Fledge: 28-31 days
Disperse: 2-4 weeks

American kestrels form strong pair bonds and some pairs remain together across years. Requires a cavity, natural or manmade, for nesting, and will nest in bird boxes, holes in trees (made by other birds or natural), cliffs and the crevices of buildings. Generally requires a few prominent elevated perches for hunting nearby. Will vigorously defend its nest against other cavity nesters. Will lay a replacement clutch if first clutch is lost early in the breeding season. Can lay two broods in one season if first clutch is early.



Life Span

Longest recorded – 14 years 8 months

Conservation Status

Not on the US Fish and Wildlife's Endangered or Threatened Species List. However it is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Idaho Fish & Game lists the American kestrel as a protected non game species for which it is illegal to collect, harm or otherwise remove from its natural habitat. American kestrels are considered to be abundant through most of its North American range. The southeastern race, *Falco sparverius paulus*, is in serious decline due to habitat loss and has been listed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission as "threatened". In Georgia it is listed as a species of special concern. Major causes of death include collisions with traffic, wires and windows; illegal shooting, predation by larger raptors, pesticide poisoning, being trapped in chimneys, drowning in water tanks, electrocution on power lines, and being trapped in fresh tar on a resurfaced road.

Viewing in the NCA

Seen in the NCA and Treasure Valley year round. Look for them perched on telephone wires and poles.

Interesting Facts

Spanish name:
Cernicalo chitero,
Cernicalo americano

- The scientific name comes from the Latin word *falx* meaning "scythe", referring to the shape of the wing and shape of the talons and *sparverius* meaning "pertaining to a hedge sparrow".
- Formerly know as Sparrow Hawk
- Other names: Desert Sparrow Hawk, Eastern Sparrow Hawk, Little Kestrel.
- Outward pointed, cone shaped projections in the center of the round nostrils slow down the air flow to allow fast flight without damaging the bird's lungs.

Sources

AXIA CD ROM - Know Your Birds of Prey

Bird Banding Lab - www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/homepage/long2890.htm

Carolina Raptor Center - www.carolinaraptorcenter.org/am_kestrrel.php

Hogle Zoo - www.hoglezoo.org/animals/view.php?id=106

Hawk Mt Sanctuary - www.hawkmountain.org/education/images/American%20Kestrel.pdf

Idaho Fish&Game - <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/wildlife/nongame/birdspecies.cfm>

National Audubon Society The Sibley Guide to Birds

The Peregrine Fund - www.peregrinefund.org/Explore_Raptors/falcons/amkestrl.html

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission – <http://wildflorida.org/imperiled/pdf/Endangered-Threatened-Special-Concern-2004.pdf>

Georgia Dept of Natural Resources, Wildlife Resources Division -

<http://georgiawildlife.dnr.state.ga.us/content/specialconcernanimals.asp>

US Fish and Wildlife Service - <http://migratorybirds.fws.gov/intrnltr/mbta/mbtandx.html#h>

Illustration: courtesy Alberta Sustainable Resource Development

Map: The Peregrine Fund

Photography: David Ellis

American Kestrel
(Falco sparverius)



Male



Female



Photos: Know Your Birds of Prey, Axia CD ROM