



A publication by:

# NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

## American Kestrel

*Falco sparverius*



Photo credit: [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American\\_Kestrel/id](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American_Kestrel/id)

North America's most common bird of prey and only slightly larger than a mourning dove, which it is constantly mistaken for. The American kestrel, previously called the sparrow hawk, belongs to the Falcon family that also includes caracara, gyrfalcon and merlin.

## Characteristics

American kestrels are one of the most colourful birds of prey. It has striking features that can differentiate them with other raptors. The male is slightly more colourful than the female with slate blue mixed with the reddish brown that both sexes have. The bird has a slate grey crown topped with a reddish brown spot and reddish brown wings with slate blue edges, and black spots all along the back. The male has slate grey wings whilst the female has reddish-brown wings. Both females and males have the strong identification of two vertical bars either side of the eyes and white cheeks. The tail is reddish brown on top with a solid black bar at the tip. The underside of the bird is pale with a wash of cinnamon and with black spots. The male has more slate grey than the female and the female has a thicker black band on the tip of the tail. The kestrel has long narrow wings with a square shaped tail when in flight.

**NWPS Headquarters**  
720-1190 Melville Street  
Vancouver, BC V6E 3W1

**NWPS Vancouver Island**  
PO Box 39058  
RPO James Bay  
Victoria, BC V8V 4X8

**t** Vancouver 604.568.9160  
**t** Victoria 778.967.3379  
**e** [info@northwestwildlife.com](mailto:info@northwestwildlife.com)  
**w** [www.northwestwildlife.com](http://www.northwestwildlife.com)

## Life Cycle

During spring time the kestrels begin their courtship. The male repeatedly flies over the female and calls to her then dives. He also brings food to the female whilst in flight. He finds a nest site for them and brings the female to see if it is good enough for her.

The American kestrel is a secondary cavity nester, meaning the cavity was created by another species such as a woodpecker, usually in a dead tree or even in a cliff or bank. They are also very prone to using nest boxes.

In each brood there are usually between 4-6 eggs, The eggs are a light pale brown with brown and grey spots. The kestrels usually only have one brood per year. The incubation is split between the male and female and takes between 28-31 days. Once hatched, the female will remain with the chicks whilst the male brings food back for all. After 1 or 2 weeks the female begins to hunt as well. By a month old the young chicks have started to fly and two weeks after that the adults stop feeding the chicks. Once fully fledged the young may group together with others fledged kestrels.

## Habitat

American kestrels can be found throughout North America. They can occupy habitat that ranges from deserts and grasslands to alpine meadows. Kestrels prefer open countryside, farmland, places with short vegetation and few trees. It can be common to see them perched on fences or telephone wires near roads. In winter females tend to be found in more open habitat than the males.

In British Columbia, the American kestrel is found mostly in the central-southern interior and the northeast, however, they can also be found in the coastal regions and the northwest in lesser numbers.

## Behaviour

The American kestrel hunts its food by watching closely from a high perch then swooping down to catch the prey. The kestrel can also be seen hovering over fields searching for food. The food can be caught on the wing, though kestrels tend to catch their food on the ground and can eat it right then and there, if the prey is small. Each individual kestrel will specialise in a particular type of prey.

As the kestrel is one of the smaller birds of prey, its food is also rather small and varied. They prey upon insects such as grasshopper, beetles and dragonflies. Spiders; voles, mice, bats; small lizards, frogs and songbirds are also captured.

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## Threats

IUCN Least Concern, and COSEWIC not at risk, however this is due to the fact that there is very little knowledge about the abundance of the kestrel and even though it is the most common bird of prey in North America, the numbers are declining rapidly.

Predators include great horned owls, golden eagles, red-tailed hawks, prairie falcons, northern goshawks, sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks, as well as crows, rat snakes, corn snakes, and raccoon can threaten young chicks.

According to the North American breeding populations, there was a 50% decrease between 1996 and 2015. Thirteen percent of the global population breeds in Canada. The current decline is due to clearing of land and the felling of dead trees that this species depends on to nest. The prey of the kestrel is also diminishing due to modern farming practices. Also the exposure to pesticides not only decreases the food source, insects, for the animals, it also weakens the egg shells of the chicks and leads to smaller clutch sizes. Despite the decline in the north, there are stable populations across the Americas.

## What We Can Do To Help

- Put up a nest box to attract a breeding pair. Make sure the box is up before the breeding season commences. You'll find plans for building a nest box of the appropriate size on the accompanied web resources.
- Do not litter on land or in the water. Participate in cleanups around your neighbourhood and beyond.
- Dispose of toxic substances such as antifreeze, batteries, and paint responsibly. Municipalities usually provide special disposal facilities for these types of things, as putting them down drains can be extremely toxic.
- Reuse and recycle whenever possible.
- Volunteer to help organizations like the Northwest Wildlife Preservation Society, CPAWS, Raincoast and Ocean Wise.

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## Other Interesting Facts

- Some species of birds including the kestrel, can see ultraviolet light, this enables kestrels to make out the trails of urine that voles leave as they run along the ground.
- When nature calls, nestling kestrels back up, raise their tails, and squirt feces onto the walls of the nest cavity. The feces dry on the cavity walls and stay off the nestlings. The nest gets to be a smelly place, with feces on the walls and uneaten parts of small animals on the floor.

## Where & When to view the animal

The best time of year to see the American kestrel is late September. The best places to view them are the Okanagan, Thompson-Nicola and middle Fraser Valleys. They can also be seen in Peace, Fort Nelson and Liard river lowlands, and south Rocky Mountain Trench.

## Bibliography

### Web Resources:

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Audobon guide to North American birds the Kestrel <http://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/american-kestrel>

Hawk mountain – what is an American Kestrel? [http://www.hawkmountain.org/raptorpedia/hawks-at-hawk-mountain/hawk-species-at-hawk-mountain/american-kestrel/page.aspx?id=498&gclid=CjwKCAjw4sLVBRAIEiwASbIR-yppX-MZYqxdWhDLTXcw8osBGYTLiS8G-vOPRt6f0avZSLRsK2p1BxoCEJ4QAvD\\_BwE](http://www.hawkmountain.org/raptorpedia/hawks-at-hawk-mountain/hawk-species-at-hawk-mountain/american-kestrel/page.aspx?id=498&gclid=CjwKCAjw4sLVBRAIEiwASbIR-yppX-MZYqxdWhDLTXcw8osBGYTLiS8G-vOPRt6f0avZSLRsK2p1BxoCEJ4QAvD_BwE)

IUCN redlist American Kestrel <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/22696395/0>

Sierra Club BC- American Kestrel <https://sierraclub.bc.ca/american-kestrel/>

Bird Atlas of British Columbia

<http://www.birdatlas.bc.ca/accounts/speciesaccount.jsp?sp=AMKE&lang=en>

National Geographic, American kestrel <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/birds/a/american-kestrel/>

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