

American Kestrel



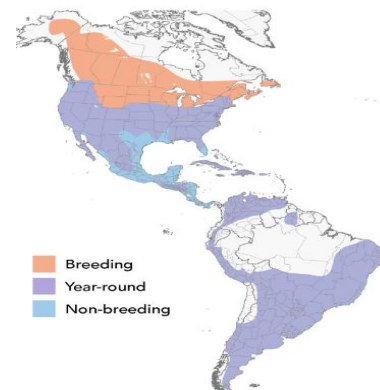
Male



Female

Classification

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Aves
Order: Falconiformes
Family: Falconidae
Genus: *Falco*
Species: *sparverius*



Range, Habitat, Conservation Status

- **Range:** Found from Alaska to Southern South America. Birds nesting in Canada and Northern United States migrate to winter south.
- **Habitat:** Open areas, sparse in trees with short ground vegetation such as deserts, grasslands, alpine meadows, and fields. Also seen perching on telephone wires and around parks, cities, and suburban areas.
- **Conservation Status:** Least Concern. Steady decline in populations since 1960s and is now endangered in some states.

Physical Characteristics

- **Body Length:** 8.7 to 12.2 inches (22-31 cm)
- **Wingspan:** 20.1 to 24.0 inches (51-61 cm)
- **Weight:** 2.8 to 5.8 ounces (80-165 g)
- **Lifespan:** In the wild, the average is 1 to 2 years. The oldest known wild American Kestrel was 11 years of age. In human care, the average lifespan is 5 years, but they have been known to live 17+ years.
- **Identifying Traits:** Smallest Falcon in North America about the size of a blue jay. It has long pointed wings, long tail with black-white square shaped tail and short legs with yellow feet. They have two dark mustache marks on the side of their heads. Birds are sexually dimorphic as males have different coloration compared to females. Males have slate-blue heads and wings with rusty-red backs and tails. Their flight feathers are black-white, and their tail is unbarred with black tip. The female is reddish and barred all over with a barred tail that has black bars. Wings look pale in color when viewed from below. They also have two black eye spots on the back of their heads to confuse predators as they resemble eyes, and tooth notch on the upper mandible to catch prey.

Behaviors

- **Feeding:** Eat insects, other invertebrates, small rodents, and small birds. Common foods include butterflies, moths, dragonflies, cicadas, grasshoppers, beetles, scorpions, spiders, small snakes, lizards, frogs, songbirds, bats, voles, shrews, and mice. Watch food from a high perch, then swoop down to capture prey. When perching isn't available, they have been seen hovering over fields looking for prey. They can flap their wings vigorously while maneuvering their tail to stay in one place like a helicopter.
- **Breeding:** The southeastern U.S. kestrel breeds in longleaf pine, sandhill habitat. Males repeatedly climb then dive while making a short series of "klee" calls before each dive to advertise their territories. Food may be exchanged as gifts for courting pairs with the male usually feeding the female. Most pairs breed in early spring to late summer.
- **Nesting:** Use already made cavities, such as old woodpecker holes, rock crevices, nooks in buildings, and natural tree hollows. They do not use nesting material and will not nest unless they can find a sufficient hole/space available. The male searches for the best site, then shows the female what he has found, and she makes the final choice. Also, will nest in nest boxes. Lay 4 to 5 eggs that hatch after around 29 days.
- **Migration:** Resident to long-distance migrations. In North America, kestrels are less likely to migrate the further south you go. Breeding populations in orange on map.
- **Call:** Shrill "killy-killy-killy" is used to communicate distress or excitement. Male and female birds will make a "chitter" call during courtship and breeding. Offspring and adults will also make a "whine" call, which is related to feeding.

Fun Facts!

- Some kestrels have made it onto TV sports coverage due to tracking, swooping down, and catching moths and other insects in the bright stadium lights.
- For nestling kestrels to stay feces free, they back up, raise their tails, and squirt feces onto the nest cavity walls.
- One of the smallest birds of prey, and the smallest falcon in North America. It weighs the same as roughly 34 pennies.
- Kestrels stash away surplus food in grass clumps, bushes, tree roots, tree limbs, fence posts, and cavities, to hide from other animals as well as store for when food is scarce.



- One of the few raptor species in North America where the females and males have different coloration, known as sexual color dimorphism or sexual dichromatism.
- Many birds can see ultraviolet light, which enables kestrels to follow the urine trails of prey animals to locate their food.

Importance

Reduce the need for pesticide usage in agricultural fields by consuming numerous crop pests. This also reduces crop damage.

Threats and Conservation measures

Conservation status is currently of least concern; however, populations declined by 53% from 1966 to 2019 making them threatened or endangered in some states. Threats include land clearing and cutting down dead trees (snags), which kestrels depend upon for nesting. Providing nest boxes has helped populations in some areas, but not all areas. Other threats include pesticides that destroy insect prey populations and competition with invasive European starlings that compete for nesting sites. Visitors can help by planting pollinator gardens and refraining from using pesticides.

Sources

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