

American Kestrel

COOL FACTS:

Scientific name:	Falco Sparverius
Average weight:	2.8 - 5.8 ounces
Average length:	9-11 inches
Average wing span:	21-24 inches
Did you know?	The American Kestrel is North America's smallest falcon.



PHYSIOLOGY

The American Kestrel is one of the most colorful of all raptors. The male has a slate-blue head, wings and crown, while the female has a reddish-brown crown and wings. The male's back and tail is rusty-red. Juvenile Kestrels look very similar to adult females. As adults, males and females have a black and white pattern on their faces and they both have two vertical black slashes on either side of their beaks. Adults have sharp, pointed beaks, long pointed wings and tails. Their large feet help them grasp their prey.

American Kestrels nest in cavities because they lack the ability to excavate their own nesting site. They rely on old woodpecker holes, natural tree hollows, rock crevices and nooks in buildings and other human-built structures. Nesting occurs from late spring to late summer in North America, with incubation underway by the end of May. There are an average of four to six eggs per clutch and they hatch 29 to 31 days after being laid. Eggs are white to yellowish, or light reddish-brown.

HABITAT/BEHAVIOUR

The American Kestrel occupies habitat ranging from deserts and grasslands to alpine meadows. You are most likely to see them perching on fence posts, telephone wires along roadsides, or in open country with short vegetation and very few trees. Kestrels hide surplus kills in grass clumps, tree roots, bushes and tree limbs to save the food or to hide it from thieves.

The American Kestrel hunts for insects and other small prey in open territory. Common foods include grasshoppers, beetles, dragonflies, spiders, mice, bats and small songbirds. The American Kestrel is the only North American falcon to habitually hover with rapid wing beats, keeping its head motionless while scanning the ground for prey. A kestrel pounces on its prey, seizing it with one or both feet.

The American Kestrel is prey for larger birds such as Northern Goshawks, Red-tailed Hawks, Barn Owls, American Crows, and Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks, as well as snakes.

THREATS

Current population declines stem from forest management practices. They are losing nesting sites with the continued clearing of dead trees. The American Kestrel is also losing prey sources and nesting sites to so-called "clean" farming practices which remove hedgerows, trees and brush. An additional threat is exposure to pesticides and other pollutants. These can reduce clutch sizes and hatching success. A larger problem with pesticides is that they destroy the insects, spiders and other prey on which the birds depend.

MORE COOL FACTS:

- Unlike humans, birds can see ultraviolet light. This enables them to make out the trail of urine that common prey leave as they run along the ground. These bright paths may highlight the way to prey.
- Formerly known as the Sparrow Hawk.