

# Facts about the Kestrel

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The **American Kestrel** (*Falco sparverius*), sometimes colloquially known as the *Sparrow Hawk*, is a small falcon, and the only kestrel found in the Americas. It is the most common falcon in North America, and is found in a wide variety of habitats. At 19–21 centimeters (7–8 in) long, it is also the smallest falcon in North America. It exhibits sexual dimorphism

in size and plumage, although both genders have a rufous back with noticeable barring. Juveniles are similar in plumage to adults.

The American Kestrel hunts by hovering in the air with rapid wing beats or perching and scanning the ground for prey. Its diet typically consists of grasshoppers, lizards, mice, and other small birds. It nests in cavities in trees, cliffs, buildings, and other structures. The female lays three to seven eggs, which both sexes help to incubate. It is a common bird to be used in falconry, especially by beginners.

Its breeding range extends from central and western Alaska across northern Canada to Nova Scotia, and south throughout North America, into central Mexico and the Caribbean. It is a local breeder in Central America and is widely distributed throughout South America. Most birds breeding in Canada and the northern United States migrate south in the winter. It is an occasional vagrant to western Europe.

## Description

At about the size of a large thrush, the American Kestrel is the smallest falcon in North America.<sup>1</sup> The American Kestrel is sexually dimorphic, although there is some overlap in plumage coloration between the sexes. The bird is 19–21 centimeters (7–8 in) in length with a wingspan of 50–60 centimeters (20–24 in), with the female typically larger than the male. The male weighs 103–120 grams (3.6–4.2 oz), and the female 126–166 grams (4.4–5.9 oz).

Plumage has more variation between the sexes than size. Males have blue-grey wings with black spots and white undersides with black barring. The back is rufous, with barring on the lower half. The belly and flanks are white with black spotting. The tail is also rufous, with a white or rufous tip and a black subterminal band. The back and wings of the female American Kestrel are rufous with dark brown barring. The undersides of the females are creamy to buff with heavy brown streaking. The tail is noticeably different from the male's, being rufous in color with numerous narrow dark black bars. Juveniles exhibit coloration patterns similar to the adults'. In both sexes, the head is white with a bluish-grey top. There are also two narrow, vertical black facial markings on each side of the head, while other falcons have one. Two black spots (ocelli) can be found on each side of the white or orangish nape. The function of these spots is debated, but the most commonly accepted theory is that they act as "false eyes", and help to protect the bird from potential attackers. The wings are moderately long, fairly narrow, and taper to a point. While the kestrel is perched, the wingtips are noticeably shorter than the tail tip.

# Ecology and behavior

American Kestrels are found in a wide variety of habitats, including grasslands, meadows, deserts, and other open to semiopen regions. They can also be found in both urban and suburban areas. A kestrel's habitat must include perches, open space for hunting, and cavities for nesting (whether natural or man-made). The American Kestrel is able to live in very diverse conditions, ranging from above the Arctic Circle, to the tropics of Central America, to elevations of over 4,500 meters (14,764 ft) in the Andes Mountains. The bird is distributed from northern Canada and Alaska to the southernmost tip of South America, Tierra del Fuego. It is the only kestrel found in the Americas. It has occurred as a vagrant in the UK, Denmark, Malta and the Azores.

American Kestrels in Canada and the northern United States typically migrate south in the winter, sometimes going as far as Central America and the Caribbean. Birds that breed south of about 35 degrees north latitude are usually year-round residents. Migration also depends on local weather conditions. Wintering kestrels' choice of habitat varies by sex. Females are found in open areas more often than males during the non-breeding season. A common explanation for this behavior is that the larger females arrive at the preferred habitat first and exclude males from their territory.

The American Kestrel is not long-lived, with an average lifespan of fifteen months. The oldest banded wild bird was 11 years and seven months old, and the oldest captive kestrel was a 17-year-old male. In a study, humans accounted for 43.2% of 1,355 reported deaths, which included direct killing and roadkills, while predation (including by larger birds of prey) accounted for 2.8%. This statistic is likely biased, however, as reported deaths are usually found near or in areas populated by humans.

## Feeding

American Kestrels feed largely on small animals such as grasshoppers, dragonflies, lizards, mice, and voles. They will also eat other small birds. The kestrel has also been reported to have killed larger animals such as snakes, bats, and squirrels. The kestrel maintains high population densities, in part because of the broad scope of its diet. The American Kestrel's primary mode of hunting is by perching and waiting for prey to come near. The bird is characteristically seen along roadsides or fields perched on objects such as trees, overhead power lines, or fence posts. It also hunts by hovering in the air with rapid wing beats and scanning the ground for prey. Other hunting techniques include low flight over fields, or chasing insects in the air

Prey is almost always caught on the ground. Before striking, the kestrel characteristically bobs its head and tail, then makes a direct flight toward the prey to grab it in its talons. During the breeding season, the bird will carry large prey back to its mate or young. One study found that an American Kestrel pair "foraged in ways that minimized the costs of energy acquisition in its particular situation". For example, if the success rate for catching prey decreases significantly in a particular area, the bird will move to a different area