

My Early Morning Porch Kestrel

an expository essay from Mr. Harrison

He swooped at me, then disappeared into the darkness before the dawn. The next day, he repeated this gesture, and I was inspired to learn more about him through research. An American Kestrel—also known on as a “Sparrow Hawk”—has decided one of the four posts that hold up my front porch should serve as his perch for morning hunting. I’ll never be sure if he swooped at my head twice because he thought I was prey, if he thought I would frighten easily and not disturb his hunting ground again, or if he is just a bad-tempered bird. What I can be sure of, however, I have included in this report about my new early-morning, feathered friend.

First and foremost, the American Kestrel is simply a beautiful little raptor. With blue-gray wings, a dotted, rufous-colored back, and a similar dot pattern on his lighter-red breast, this bird is fantastic to look at when he’s not being shy or flying away at my approach. He stands somewhere between seven and eight inches, and impressively those little wings—when outspread—are close to three times longer than his height is from head to toe. His facial markings, to me, are his most impressive feature; that bluish-gray cap (see my picture of my little bird at right) almost resembles the shape of an actual human head of hair. Two vertical black streaks drip down from his shiny, alert eyes.



Just beyond those real eyes are two large, dark circles that many believe are present to resemble larger, always-open eyes. Why? Many believe these false “eyes,” being so big, fool larger raptors from thinking this bird is a small, easy meal.

And that leads me to two facts I am always interested to learn when researching the animal kingdom: 1) What eats the American Kestrel; and 2) What is eaten by him? Interesting enough, there was not a lot of information about other animals that specifically include the Kestrel in their diet. One article I found online said that perhaps larger hawks would eat this bird, but this isn’t common; one study I found

said that less than three percent of kestrels die because they are being hunted by other birds or carnivores. Perhaps those “false eyes” of his really do their job so that the only things that definitively eat a kestrel are nature’s decomposers after the bird dies naturally or from human-caused accidents. Comparably to other raptors, a kestrel’s lifespan seems pretty short; the average Sparrow Hawk lives only 15 months. In that time, they do eat plenty of delicious pests out there—like grasshoppers, mice, and voles—as well as some more helpful insects, like dragonflies, and more helpful reptiles, like lizards. They will also eat smaller birds, like sparrows, which is obviously the source of its nickname.

This bird that swooped at me on my porch in the early hours is actually a falcon—the smallest member of the falcon family, in fact. Like other falcons, the Kestrel can be trained to hunt and return to the gloved arm of the person who trained it. With such a short life expectancy, I’m not sure if it would be worth it to spend the time training a Kestrel in the ways of falconry, but an article I read reported that it can learn to hunt in this trained manner quite quickly. When naturally hunting, he either hovers in the air, searching for prey that he can dive at, or he studies movements on the ground from a perch—like the post on my front porch. This past spring, we had a population of fairly destructive voles move into the rock wall found in my backyard. I can only hope my kestrel friend is studying those mouse-sized pests from his perch in those early hours of the morning. I would certainly like to be rid of my vole problem before this bird’s fifteen months are up.

I find it sad when I meet someone who doesn’t think birds are very interesting animals to observe or to learn about. I know a few people who are total bird enthusiasts, and that’s okay for them, but not really for me. I do believe, however, that if a creature—like this beautiful American Kestrel—“sets up shop” in your yard, you should take the time to learn what he’s doing and what you can do to help him help you. If he wants to swoop at me, I’ll let him; just as long as he promises to devour some of those voles that nibble on my flower and vegetable seedlings. Mr. Kestrel, you can stay on my porch anytime you like.

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