



Guess who's coming to dinner?



Kestrels use a perch-and-pounce hunting style

Brunswick Wildlife ...but you can call me “Sparrow Hawk”

Many of you have watched this bird on telephone lines all your life and may know it by its former name, the Sparrow Hawk. This certainly matches my experience growing up in Eastern North Carolina. My apologies to the American Ornithologists Union, I have to confess I sometimes use a former name for a species because it has a more down-home, nostalgia-invoking feel to it.

The Sparrow Hawk was renamed in the 1950's as the American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) to remove ambiguities in naming the world's birds. The Sparrow Hawk is actually in the falcon family and the Eurasian Sparrowhawk is a hawk in the *Accipiter* family. Renaming made sense and our guy had to give up the title; however, when I see those long slender wings gracefully take to the air with deep wing beats, my mind still shouts “Sparrow Hawk”!

Kestrels are the smallest and most numerous and widespread falcon in North America. They are about the size of another “telephone wire bird”, the Morning Dove, except they have larger heads.

While perched the kestrel's wingtips are noticeably shorter than the tail yet its tail is shorter than the dove's. Also, Kestrels may be recognized even in silhouette by their head-bobbing, tail-pumping, and tail-spreading displays. These behaviors may be used for balance, judging distance to prey, and as precursor to eminent flight or diving at prey.

This colorful species is sexually “dichromatic” meaning the colors of several feathered areas are very different between males and females. Its plumage, therefore, may be used to differentiate adult males and females. Kestrels are also “dimorphic” based on gender size, with the female being approximately ten percent heavier than the male.

Males have blue-gray wings and rufous patches on their crown plus rufous napes, breasts, backs, and tails. Females have buff-colored breasts with brown streaks and rufous tails with many dark horizontal bars and a narrow, white band at the tip.

Kestrels may be quickly differentiated from our larger falcons...the Peregrine Falcon and Merlin. The male, by its colorful plumage, and both sexes by their two facial stripes...call them sideburns and moustaches if you want. The Peregrine and Merlin have just one “moustache” stripe.

American Kestrels migrate regionally, shifting southward to ensure prey availability. While kestrels in higher latitudes all migrate, the tendency to migrate decreases as the latitude decreases, and birds in the most southern part of its range may be non-migratory. Consequently, while kestrels may be found year-round in the Lower Cape Fear, our winter numbers are greater.

Kestrels love open habitats that offer good hunting perches such as meadows, grasslands, power-line easements, farmlands, and early successional abandoned farms. It is attracted to other human-modified habitats such as urban parks. Also, they sometimes occupy the same habitat as Red-tailed Hawks and Northern Harriers, taking the smaller prey left by those big guys.

The kestrel is generally a cavity nester. Their cavities are usually in dead trees and consist of natural cavities plus those created by woodpeckers. They are, however, opportunistic nesters and will use artificial nest boxes, crevices in cliffs, and building ledges. In some areas, kestrel populations appear to be limited by availability of high-quality cavities and since they readily use nest boxes there is an increase in kestrel nest-box programs.

Sparrow hawks...er ah...kestrels take most of their prey on the ground but may take dragonflies or small birds on the wing. Small prey may be eaten on the ground, with larger meals taken back to the hunting perch as shown in the photo.

Unlike many “perch-and-pounce” raptors, it also has the ability to hover like ospreys and harriers. Hovering is less common and generally happens when suitable perches are lacking and enabled by the lift generated by a strong wind in its face.

Their diet consists mainly of insects such as grasshoppers, cicadas, beetles, dragonflies, scorpions, spiders, and butterflies plus small rodents such as voles, mice, and shrews. Occasionally kestrels feast on small songbirds, snakes, frogs, and lizards.

Falconers typically use American Kestrels to hunt non-game species such as House Sparrows, starlings, and grackles. Male kestrels, due to their smaller size, are best suited for sparrows and starlings while females are able to take larger prey like grackles and, on rare occasions, even doves.

When I lived in Gainesville, Florida, there was a kestrel nest in a neighbor’s yard. My yard had enough voles, grasshoppers, and other huge insects to support many families of kestrels. Of course, it was included in just one territory so no shortage of prey.

Each year, I watched as a juvenile kestrel learned to hunt. It was sometimes comical. I occasionally saw a young kestrel go after one of my fox squirrels. It was never successful as far as I know. Probably lucky it did not catch one.

On another occasion a juvenile kestrel buzzed a Pileated Woodpecker, landing a couple of limbs above it in a small pine tree. Limb by limb, the huge woodpecker climbed up toward the kestrel. Eventually the kestrel left in a hurry.

For birds, learning what to eat can be trial and error. Sometimes the lesson is what not to eat. Lesson learned! Don't bite off more than you can chew...and if it comes after you, it probably isn't food. I think that lesson also applies to humans.

John Ennis