



American Kestrel

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



Photo courtesy of Karen Marzynski

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** American kestrels are native to most of North, Central, and South America. They live in habitats that include open country, meadows, grasslands with scattered trees, semi-desert, desert, agricultural fields, and urban and suburban areas. Highly adaptable, the American kestrel lives just about everywhere, provided there is open ground for hunting and places to perch.
- **Exhibit Location:** Pole Barn; used in demonstrations on and off zoo grounds; not on exhibit

Characteristics

- Length: 9-11 inches; Weight: 3-5.5 ounces; Wingspan: 20-24 inches
- The American kestrel is the smallest and most common of North American falcons.
- Adult male: Its wings are blue-gray with black spots and its crown blue-gray with some orange. There are buffy spots with dark centers on either side of the back of its head creating eyespots visible from behind. The tail is reddish on the back with a white or reddish tip. Its underparts are pale buff to orange, with some black spotting, especially along the sides.
- Adult female: Its wings are reddish, barred with black. The crown is gray, and the back is reddish with heavy dark barring. The tail is reddish with black bands. Its underparts are creamy to buff, and the legs are yellow.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** 3-5 years; **In Captivity** up to 14 years

Behaviors

- The American kestrel hunts from high perches or on the wing, invariably hovering when hunting.
- Its flight is graceful and rapid.
- They are not a social bird, for the most part. American kestrels will pair up during mating season, having joint territories.
- Kestrels are very alert, suspicious birds, with a very constant, high-pitched cry of alarm.
- Their call is a rapid, high “klee,klee,klee” or “killy, killy, killy.”
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** live insects, cat toys (e.g. small stuffed grouse)

Reproduction

- Kestrels are at least 2 years old before gaining access to a mate and nesting territory.
- American kestrels are cavity nesters.
- They may nest in old woodpecker holes, nest boxes, and crevices in cliffs or buildings. No material is added to the nest hole.
- Courtship behavior usually begins with the onset of spring.
- Female kestrels will not seek out nest sites on their own.
- At first, females are loosely bonded to a particular mate. They move about between 2 or more males before settling down with one.
- After mating, the male brings the food to the female in the nest hole.

- Eggs may be laid from mid-April through early June. Kestrels will lay 3-7 buff with reddish-brown marked eggs, but typically 4-5 are laid.
- American kestrels cache (store) food year round unlike other falcons that only cache food during breeding season. When incubating eggs, the cache of excess food ensures that chicks can be fed even if the male does not return with food.
- Incubation lasts about 30 days with the young beginning to fledge at 27-34 days.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** small rodents, reptiles, insects, amphibians, small sparrow-sized birds
- **At the Zoo:** insects, mice, small rats

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** Least Concern **CITES Appendix II**
- **U.S. Migratory Bird Act:** Protected
- **U.S. Federal List:** No Special Status
- Some areas have seen a decline in the American kestrel population because of habitat loss and human disturbance.
- Predators: man, birds of prey

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- The American kestrel is sometimes called the Sparrow Hawk.
- American kestrels are the only North American falcons to hunt by hovering (staying suspended or fluttering in one place for a period of time). Prolonged hovering is mainly limited to specialists such as the kestrel.
- Kestrels are the only North American raptor with circular nostrils.
- Kestrels can fly 60 mph when pursuing prey.
- The U.S. Air Force designed fighters using the falcons' wing design to gain the ability to maneuver quickly in the air.
- Falconry became a serious sport in England in 1066. One could tell the rank of an Englishman by the falcon carried on his wrist. Priests carried the Old World kestrel.

Sources:

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