

NATURE DETECTIVES

Summer 2015



Questing for Kestrels

As a [nature detective](#) you know some types of birds hunt other animals to eat. It's how they make a living. The birds that chase down their prey and grasp it with their powerful talons (long, clawed toes) are called [raptors](#).

If you were to draw or describe a raptor, you could start with the sharp, curved talons, which are important for striking, seizing and carrying prey. Maybe you would think of the hook-shaped beak first. The knife-like beak is certainly a useful tool for a meat-eating bird. Don't forget the fierce raptor eyes, capable of zeroing in on prey with telescopic vision.



What Raptor Comes to Mind?

Do you visualize a bald eagle or a great-horned owl when you think of the word *raptor*? Perhaps you picture a peregrine falcon because of their impressive flying skills and their ability to dive at breath-taking speeds to catch their prey. Maybe you've read about peregrines and how they seize other birds in mid-flight.

Pull Out and Save

What about the [American kestrel](#)?

Did this raptor, actually the most common [falcon](#) in our area, enter your thoughts?

Kestrels live in our area all year. Kestrels are fierce, territory-guarding predators with dramatic coloring. They hunt in plain sight and in daylight, and they show off awesome flying techniques.



A kestrel isn't as big as an eagle or even a red-tailed hawk. These falcons are petite. They are only the size of robins, yet they pack all the exciting qualities of bigger raptors into their small bodies.

If you haven't watched this little falcon, maybe it's time to go questing for kestrels. They tolerate human activity so once you learn where they prefer to hunt, it is pretty easy to observe these colorful predators in action.



Open Habitat for Kestrels

Despite being small raptors that hunt in broad daylight, kestrels are not secretive. They prefer wide-open spaces with low vegetation plus a few tall perches. These falcons use perches as a lookout to scan open areas for prey. Scattered tall trees, utility poles, signposts, fences or even highway signs may be perches. Kestrels live from the plains grasslands to alpine meadows. They can be spotted near open farm fields, along roadways, in meadows and in parks.

Country roads are great places to search for kestrel activity. Look for them on utility wires next to farm fields. Often a kestrel will be bobbing its head and pumping its tail as it stares around. It might be zeroing in on prey or on the watch for intruder birds in its territory.

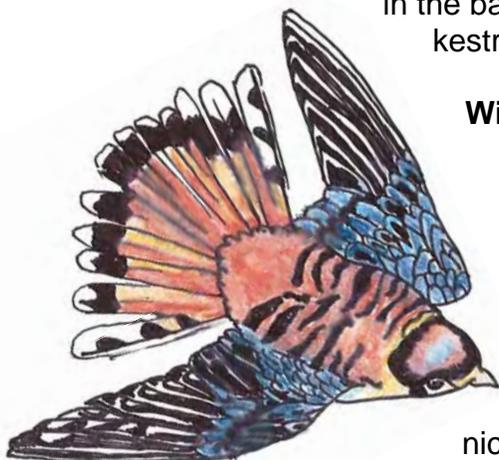
Useful Coloring and Extra “Eyes”

Dazzling black and white coloring on their heads is a good identifier for kestrels. They sport black bars on either side of their white cheeks. Like the dark smear under football players’ eyes, black feathers cut down on glare to make it easier to see what they are trying to catch.



Male kestrels stand out with their blue-gray wings and red-brown tails set off by a creamy belly. White dots show on their dark wing feathers in flight. Females are slightly paler with less colorful, red-brown wings. They both wear a cap of blue-gray feathers with a reddish top.

Kestrels have two black patches on the back of the head. These dark spots look almost like eyes, and might trick or startle another animal into thinking the kestrel is watching it with “eyes in the back of its head.” The tricky eyespots may help protect kestrels from bigger predators.



Windhover

In flight kestrels look slim with long wings and tail. They have a remarkable ability to hover in place to scan for prey on the ground below them. It takes a lot of energy to spread their tail feathers and flutter their wings to remain like helicopters in one place. When they face into a breeze, the wind helps hold them up and makes hovering much easier. Kestrels have earned the nickname *windhover* from this hunting technique.

What Prey Do Kestrels Hunt?

Sparrow hawk is a common nickname for kestrels, but unlike *windhover* it isn't quite as accurate. Kestrels do hunt small birds, but they eat lots more insects than sparrows or other birds. *Grasshopper falcon* is a better nickname.

Grasshoppers may be their favorite prey. They also hunt crickets, beetles, butterflies, moths and dragonflies. Mice, voles and other small rodents are part of their diet, especially in winter. Small snakes, lizards, frogs and even spiders are an occasional meal.

When more prey is caught than eaten, kestrels hide (cache) the extra food in clumps of grass or twigs on the ground and on bushes, trees or fences. Later the hidden snacks will be retrieved and eaten.

What Hunts Kestrels?

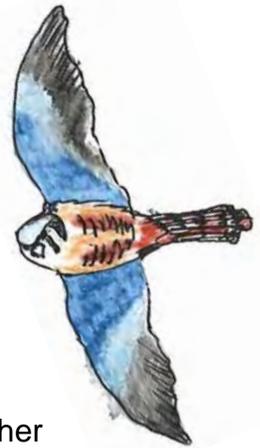
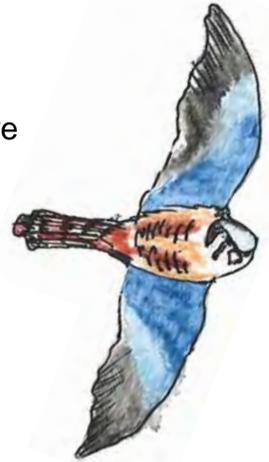
Bigger raptors such as red-tailed hawks, prairie falcons or barn owls may snatch a kestrel for dinner. Newly fledged kestrels are in the most danger. The falcons are also in danger of getting hit by cars or running into windows. Kestrel eggs and chicks are at risk from nest robbers such as crows and raccoons.

Chick Protection

Kestrel parents form strong partnerships and will usually raise a family together every summer. They look for old woodpecker holes or natural tree cavities as a secure spot to lay their eggs. Crevices on cliffs or buildings will work, too. They also are the only raptor species that will use human-made nest boxes.

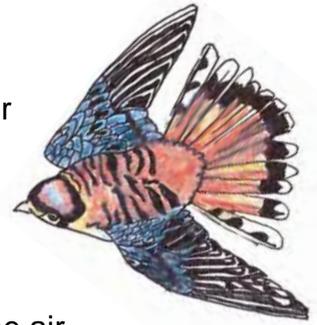
Mostly the mom sits on the nest while the dad hunts, but dads will take a turn at tending eggs and hatchlings too. After the chicks are about ten days old, both parents hunt to provide enough meals for the rapidly growing nestlings.

The chicks won't fly (fledge) until they are a month old. After the fledglings leave the nest, the parents still feed them for a few weeks. Learning to be an alert and skilled hunter is tough, and many young birds don't survive. A really successful kestrel might live 11 years but most are not that fortunate.



Go Fly a Kestrel!

Kestrels are light birds that are tossed about in strong winds despite their incredible flying skills. When winds are gentle, they have an amazing ability to flutter in place to look for prey. Here are two tricks they use:



Hovering—Kestrels can beat their wings very fast to stay above ground in one spot. This takes a lot of energy.

Kiting--If a kestrel faces right into the wind, the breeze helps it float in the air and takes a little less effort.

Make the small kite from the directions below (or use a kite that you already have). The kite can be your paper kestrel. Watch how the wind helps hold up the kite. If the wind changes direction or stops, what happens to the kite? What do you think happens to a kestrel in the wind? What happens when the wind is very strong?

Directions for a Simple Kite

Step 1: Gather materials (one piece of paper, a ruler, a pencil, some kite string, a stapler, and a hole punch).

Step 2: Fold paper in half.

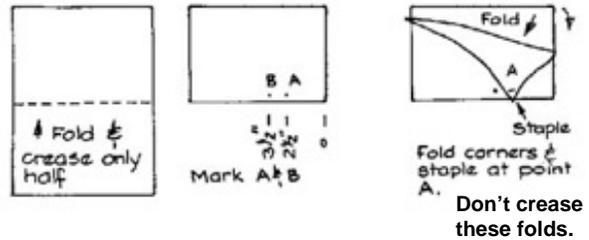
Step 3: Along the folded side of your paper, measure and mark off at 2 1/2 inches (point A) and at 3 1/2 inches (point B).

Step 4: Take two corners of your paper and staple them together at point A.

Step 5: Punch a hole at point B.

Step 6: Tie a long piece of kite string through the hole you've just punched.

Step 7: Fly your kite on a windy day.



Don't crease these folds.



Kestrel Sightings

Look for kestrels sitting on wires near a road or on fence posts, and if you're lucky you might just see one hovering above a tasty meal in the field below!



Come to the [Nature Detectives In the Field Kestrel Program](#) listed in the calendar of events near the end of this IMAGES. A live kestrel may make an appearance too!