

Species Spotlight: Kestrels—Fierce and Fancy Falcons!

By Susie Fitzgerald

North America's littlest falcon, the **American Kestrel** packs a predator's fierce intensity into its petite body. About the size of a Mourning Dove, the Kestrel is one of the most colorful of all the raptors. The male's slate-blue head and wings contrast elegantly with his rusty-red back and tail. The female has the same warm reddish on her wings, back, and tail.



Like other birds of prey, falcons in particular, Kestrels are fast, agile, and precise flyers. They can also hover facing into the wind, flapping and adjusting their long tails to stay in place for long periods of time.

We often see Kestrels in our area year-round, sitting on fenceposts or electrical lines, calmly waiting to nab their next tasty snack. Kestrels generally hunt by day. Common foods include grasshoppers, cicadas, beetles, and dragonflies; butterflies and moths; voles, mice, bats, and small songbirds. They also sometimes eat small snakes, lizards, and frogs. Kestrels hide surplus kills in grass clumps, tree roots, bushes, fence posts, tree limbs, and cavities, to save the food for lean times or to hide it from thieves.



It can be tough being one of the smallest birds of prey. Despite their fierce lifestyle, Kestrels end up as prey for larger birds such as Goshawks, Red-tailed Hawks, Barn Owls, and Cooper's Hawks. They are also vulnerable to attacks by Raccoons and Snakes.

Kestrels nest in cavities, although they lack the ability to excavate their own. They rely on old Woodpecker holes, natural tree hollows, rock crevices, and nooks in buildings and other human-built structures. The male searches for possible nest cavities. When he's found suitable candidates, he shows them to the female, who makes the final choice. Typically, nest sites are in trees along wood edges or in the middle of open ground. Kestrels do not use nesting materials. If the cavity floor is composed of loose material, the female hollows out a shallow depression there.

Like other wildlife, habitat loss is the most serious threat to Kestrels. They are declining in many parts of their home range, especially due to clearing land for development and removing standing dead trees (or *snags*) these birds depend on for their nest sites

An additional threat is exposure to pesticides and other pollutants, which can reduce clutch sizes and hatching success. The larger problem with pesticides is that they destroy the insects, spiders, and other prey on which these birds depend. According to the

National Audubon Society, “over the last 50 years, biocides have been implicated in die-offs in Ospreys, Peregrine Falcons, and Bald Eagles. Most of those species have since recovered, thanks to bans and limits on DDT and endrin. But research shows that modern-day pesticides—particularly the weed killer paraquat and neonicotinoids (like Roundup)—may still be causing reproductive failure in small-bodied raptors such as Kestrels.”



How can we honor our wild neighbor, the American Kestrel?



- **Put up a Nest Box!** Kestrels readily take to nest boxes in the absence of tree cavities. The secret is to locate it wisely and build it properly to fit this bird species. For Kestrel nest box plans and recommended locations, visit the All About Birds website at: <https://nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses/right-bird-right-house/>

- **Avoid using toxic pesticides, weedkillers, rodent bait, or rat poison** which kills their food sources and is fatal to Kestrels if ingested. Kestrels are our natural pest control specialists! They are one of our best hunters of insects, voles, and mice. According to the National Audubon Society, “over the last 50 years, biocides have been implicated in die-offs in Ospreys, Peregrine Falcons, and Bald Eagles. Most of those species have since recovered, thanks to bans and limits on DDT and endrin. But research shows that modern-day pesticides—particularly the weed killer paraquat and neonicotinoids (like Roundup)—may still be causing reproductive failure in small-bodied raptors such as Kestrels.”

- **Watch a family of American Kestrels** in their nest box thanks to a bird cam from the Raptor Resource Project on the All About Birds website:

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/cams/top-5-highlights-from-the-2025-american-kestrel-cam/>

Once you see these fierce and fancy falcons, they are so beautiful and awe-inspiring, you’ll be scanning fenceposts and powerlines to catch a glimpse of them wherever you go!

To learn more about our local birds and other wildlife, visit the Willowbrook Wildlife website at www.willowbrookwildlife.net

Sources:

[Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#);

[National Audubon Society](#)

Photos from OpenVerse