

## American Kestrel

The American kestrel is our smallest falcon and is common through much of North and South America. The kestrels that breed in northern Canada migrate south for the winter, but Nebraska's are permanent residents. North America's most colorful bird of prey, the kestrel is unusual in that the plumage of the male and female is quite different. The male has a rust colored back and tail, blue-gray wings and dark spots on its light breast. The female has rusty wings barred with black and streaks rather than spots on its breast. Both have dark vertical bands on their head that help reduce glare. As with most raptors, the female is larger.

Kestrels, once called sparrow hawks, eat large insects, mainly grasshoppers, and small mammals and birds. You can often see kestrels perching on trees, poles and wires along rural roads from where they swoop down on their prey. They also hunt by hovering when perches are not available. All falcons have a notched bill that they use to crush the neck vertebrae of their prey. Kestrels prefer open habitats including grasslands, agricultural fields, and parkland but are very adaptable and are now found in urban areas as well. Look out for their long wings and tails and characteristic behavior of pumping their tails after they have landed on a perch.



Falcons do not build nests, though they occasionally use the abandoned nests of other birds. Kestrels nest in tree cavities, woodpecker holes, holes in banks, building crevices and nesting boxes. There they lay four or five eggs that hatch in about 30 days. After hatching, the female feeds the young with food provided by the male. The family stays together for some time after the young have fledged. Only about 50% of the young survive their first year – learning to hunt successfully is a difficult task. When not breeding, kestrels are solitary birds. Their call is a shrill “klee, klee, klee”.

The Nature Center is home to two American kestrels. The female had a broken right wing, and came to us from Raptor Recovery Nebraska in 1999, and now flies reasonably well, but cannot hover. The male was found near Norfolk with a broken right wing and leg. He came to us in September, 2001, can hardly fly, and is quite unstable.



Stop in at the Prairie Building to observe these beautiful birds up close. Though quite dainty, they have the sharp talons and hooked beaks of all raptors. Their large eyes tell the story of their keen eyesight, and their plumage is richly colored and complex. They deserve our notice and appreciation.