



## American Kestrel

*Falco sparverius*



### Taxonomy

Kingdom - - - -	Animalia
Phylum - - -	Chordata
Subphylum - - -	Vertebrata
Class - - - -	Aves
Subclass - - -	Neornithes
Order - - - -	Falconiformes
Family - - -	Falconidae
Genus - - -	<i>Falco</i>
Species - - -	<i>sparverius</i>
Subspecies (Caribbean)-	<i>caribbaearum</i>

### Identification Characteristics

◆ Length	-	19 to 21 cm
◆ Wingspan	-	50 to 60 cm
◆ Weight (males)	-	102 to 120 gm
◆ Weight (females)	-	126 to 166 gm
◆ Facial bars	-	two
◆ Color of tail & back	-	rusty reddish
◆ Tail pattern	-	black band at tip

### Description

The American kestrel, *Falco sparverius*, is a common falcon in the Virgin Islands. Although frequently called a "sparrow" hawk - in reference to its small size - these kestrels eat more than sparrows. Locally, the American Kestrel is also known as the killy-killy, probably because of the shrieking sounds they make.

The American Kestrel is the smallest raptor in our area. Worldwide, the only smaller species in the genus *Falco* is the Seychelles kestrel. Generally, the American Kestrel is about 20 cm long, with a wingspan of 50 to 60 cm. Males weigh from 103 to 120 g and females between 126 and 166 g. The size is comparable to a dove. The feathers are dark brown with black and white banding on the lateral feathers. The head has a distinctive facial pattern with two black bars, one beneath the eye like a black moustache and the other toward the back of the head. Males are much more brightly colored than females, a pattern known as sexual dichromatism. Feathers on the back and tail of males are splashed vivid rufous, and feathers on the shoulders are slate blue. Females wear more subdued colors. Their

wings are rusty brown like their back and their tail is rusty reddish with a black band at the end.

### Distribution & Habitat

The American Kestrel permanently inhabits (without seasonal migration) North and South America from near the tree line in Alaska and Canada, south to Tierra del Fuego. The bird can also be found in the West Indies, the Juan Fernandez Islands and Chile. It is largely absent from heavily forested areas, including Amazonia.

The American Kestrel nests in tree cavities, woodpecker holes, crevices of buildings, holes in banks, nest boxes or, rarely, old nests of other birds. It is highly adaptable behaviorally and lives just about everywhere, as long as there is some open ground for hunting and conspicuous places on which to perch (e.g., telephone wires).

It is often seen sitting on exposed wires or perches while looking for its prey. American kestrels usually mate for life. Bird lovers adore them for their lightheartedness and playfulness. Unfortunately American Kestrel populations have declined greatly in the Virgin Islands due to the

loss of nesting habitat from both development and hurricanes.

The American Kestrel is, for the most part, not a social bird. During the mating season, males and females pair up and have joint territories. Presumably, the pair or the male defends the territory. The function of the territory may not be so much to ensure mating as to maintain a pair bond during the nesting season when the male is needed to help rear offspring.

### **Diet**

American kestrels hunt throughout the day, but may be more active in the early morning and evening. They eat mostly lizards and large insects (mainly grasshoppers), small mammals (mice and sparrow-sized birds), sandpiper chicks, scorpions and amphibians. The American Kestrel has a large economic benefit to the islands – it helps control some of the animals we consider a nuisance such as mice and insects.

### **Reproduction**

For up to six weeks before egg laying, females are promiscuous, mating with two or three males. Once a female settles with one mate, the pair mate frequently until egg laying. Three to seven eggs are laid (usually 4 or 5) over a period of 2 or 3 days. Eggs are white, cream or pale pink with an average size of 35 x 29 mm. Laying occurs in February.

The female does most of the incubation, but males have been known to occasionally incubate. Both sexes have brood patches. Incubation lasts 29 – 30 days and hatched chicks are non-competitive. Once chicks have hatched, females beg food from males. The female, in turn, feeds the young for the first 20 days. After that period, chicks beg for food from males and feed themselves. After 30 days, chicks leave the nest. The family remains as a unit for some time. The survival rate of chicks is about 50% under natural conditions, but it is usually higher under better conditions (e.g., human-provided nesting boxes).

### **Status in the VI**

The availability of nesting places (tree-cavities) may be biggest factor limiting populations of American kestrels. Their numbers may be increased by the installation of nesting

boxes. However, whether or not additional nesting boxes are introduced, the bird is common.

The American Kestrels, as are all predatory birds, are protected under the Migratory Bird Act. These miniature falcons usually do not build nests of their own but rely on natural sites or those created by other birds or animals, including man made nest boxes. When built properly, the Kestrels will use their bird homes for life. The breeding season usually occurs in late winter (December through February) and summer (June - July). The nest site is usually located in the cavity of an old tree, transformer or under the eaves of buildings.

### **What you can do to HELP**

1. Nest boxes should be placed high (at least 15ft-5 m) in areas of little disturbance. Box openings should face south or east to allow warming in the morning, but not overheating in the afternoon. Also open vegetation around the site allows for easy access to the box for the falcon.
2. Kestrels are very valuable to us in the tropics. They primarily eat animals that we consider pests.
3. Reducing the amount of pesticides and chemicals we use to control pests will help the Kestrels and other important wildlife on our islands.
4. Remember it is illegal to take, catch, possess, injure, harass, or kill any indigenous species. The only exceptions are for people holding valid permits from the Division of Fish and Wildlife.
5. For more information on this and other animals in the Virgin Islands please visit our website at:

**[www.vifishandwildlife.com](http://www.vifishandwildlife.com)**

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