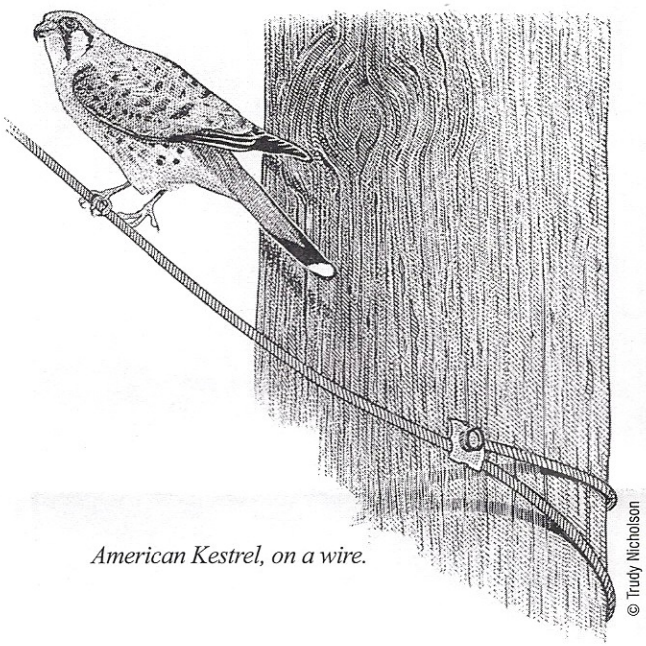
Local Nature

by Eric Dinerstein

A Hovering Falcon

Birds of prey are perhaps the most awesome flying machines of all. The Peregrine falcon is the fastest bird in the world. The Harpy Eagle of tropical Central and South America snatches three-toed sloths from tree canopies with talons longer than grizzly bear claws. And of course, there's our soaring American Eagle, also known as the Bald Eagle, the mighty aerial predator that is our national symbol (and truth be told is a frequent scavenger of salmon carcasses). But for maneuverability, there is no raptor (the generic name for a bird of prey) as versatile as the diminutive American Kestrel. It can swoop from the sky, like its relative the Peregrine, but it can also stall and hover in the wind before streaking down to pick up a moving mouse, often uttering this falcon's diagnostic call, "klee, klee, klee, klee," when excited.



American Kestrel, on a wire.

If only we could see such a display here in Cabin John.

You could be an avid MacArthur Boulevard naturalist, daily checking the telephone poles and wires—a favorite elevated perching site for this hunter—but you probably won't see an American Kestrel unless you climbed aboard a time machine set to return to the 1960s. Luckily, I did see one last winter, in the company of neighbor Jon Putnam and other senior naturalists. It was a bitterly cold February day and towards the end of our birding, we were looking out on a dairy farmer's field near Hoyle's Mill, a good 20 miles away from Cabin John as the crow flies. And there sitting on a wire—scanning the field below for a mid-day meal of white-throated sparrow or field mouse—was a beautiful kestrel. In our spotting scope we could clearly see it. In contrast to all the other raptors, where the males and females look alike but the female is usually larger, male and female kestrels are roughly similar in size but differ in plumage. The males have slate-blue wings while the female has rich reddish brown wings, among other subtle differences in the tail and breast. Both sexes share the two black stripes on the face, like vertical moustaches. All other falcons have only one. These stripes make it look more like a peregrine falcon than a true kestrel (of which there are many species in Africa and Madagascar, Asia, and Australasia).

The American Kestrel is the smallest raptor in North America but also the most abundant even if now rare in our area. There is a connection between body plan, ecology, and numerical dominance that all humans who abhor weightlifting in the gym should cherish. The American Kestrel is considerably leaner and less bulked up than the larger falcons. "Pecs" are important to birds of prey and body-builders, but in the kestrel pectoral muscles make up only 12% of the body weight compared to 20% for its more robust cousin, the Peregrine. Further, the kestrel's long and narrow tapering wings are not like the wider airfoils found on the bigger falcons either. This selection for a less muscular body type is perfect for a bird that hunts by ambush rather than hunting on the wing for long periods and chasing other birds in flight. The kestrel does put its money on robust talons and beaks, the better to quickly snatch and kill. Here is the payoff: the slender build and ambush hunting strategy allows the bird to conserve energy and persist on a lower daily food intake than bigger falcons, yet they still possess enough strength to kill a bird as large as or even bigger than themselves. But their meat and potatoes are much smaller prey, including two staples, grasshoppers and dragonflies. It is their broad diet of more widely available food sources, a need for less food per day, and the ability to live near humans or in the most remote habitats that has allowed kestrels to populate a vast range through the Americas from the Arctic tundra to the southern tip of South America. The Eurasian Kestrel is similarly wide-ranging on the other side of the world.

Then why can't we see them anymore? When I was younger, a birding trip to any farming area close to a town would turn up a number of kestrels, especially if you looked on telephone poles or lines, they were, to paraphrase Leonard Cohen, the 'bird of prey on a wire.' But these days, nada.

Data from the North American Breeding Bird Survey, a count that covers more than 400 bird species, reveals a kestrel decline estimated at nearly 50 percent of the population over the past fifty or so years. That's a big drop for a bird considered common in North America and once numbering in the millions of pairs.

Why do many ornithologists believe this raptor is in serious decline in some areas when it was once the most abundant bird of prey in North America? There are likely local factors involved. In the southeastern U.S., for example, kestrels have declined by 80%, in part because of clearing of mature long-leaf pine forests in which older trees offered many desirable nest cavities. Other factors could be increased predation by the growing number of Cooper's Hawks, frequent exposure to pesticides, and competition at nest sites by the invasive Eurasian starling. My bet is on the widespread use of chemicals to which raptors are highly sensitive, a well-documented source of mortality in ospreys, eagles, and some hawks.

The American Kestrel could be another canary in the coalmine and a warning to us. To go from the most abundant raptor in North America to one experiencing a perilous decline in a short time frame is but another indicator of the growing extinction crisis of species populations. This hovering falcon needs us to stop our dithering and help it recover. —

Author and illustrator's note: This column marks our 40th entry in the Village News, under the remarkable editorship of Tim Weedlun. Trudy and I thank him for all of his efforts and being such a fine editor and gracious nudge when needed.