

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*



Folk Name: Sparrowhawk, Kitty Hawk, Brownie

Status: Resident

Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

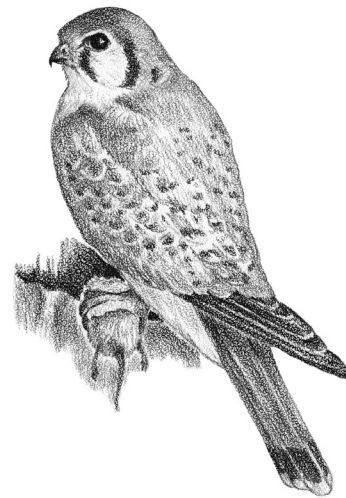
Habitat: Open country, fields, pastures, also found occasionally in urban areas

The American Kestrel is the smallest falcon found in our region, and it is the only falcon that has historically nested here. These small but vigorous predators perch high on tree branches, poles, or power lines, or hover in the sky and then dart down to capture everything from grasshoppers, lizards, and mice, to sparrows or other small birds. Kestrels were once considered common year-round residents throughout our region, but fewer were generally found here during the summer. In the late 1800s in Chester County, Leverett Loomis noted them as “very common during winter” and “common” in summer. Winter kestrel numbers are supplemented by birds from the north which move south to avoid freezing temperatures. These northern visitors depart for their breeding grounds in the spring.

These charming falcons have long been of interest to local residents. One of the earliest reports of a kestrel in the Central Carolina region is a note about a local sharpshooter published in the *Daily Charlotte Observer* on October 24, 1874. “There is a young man living about a mile from Charlotte who hunts birds with a rifle. A few days ago he killed four partridges at his first four shots, while they were on the wing. Sometime ago he killed with his rifle a sparrow hawk while it was flying two hundred feet above the ground.”

Two later reports of kestrels involve birds taken as pets. On June 22, 1876, the *Daily Charlotte Observer* reported that the previous evening, Mr. George T. Coleman visited their office carrying a sparrow hawk “as tame as a kitten.” “Mr. Coleman bought it off an old lady who brought in a lot of chickens and sold the sparrow hawk at the same price as that of a chicken.” On July 27, 1879, the newspaper reported that: “A shoemaker in the city has for a pet a sparrow hawk which is as gentle and affectionate as any pet can be made, frequently perching itself upon its masters shoulder and sitting there while he carries on his work.” *The Alexander County Journal* carried this note on September 12, 1889: “Col. Flowers captured a sparrow hawk the other evening, that had taken up quarters in the Methodist church.”

William McIlwaine regularly sighted kestrels in Charlotte during the 1920s and early 1930s. On January 17, 1928, he wrote: “A sparrow hawk flew past my window a short time ago.” On December 16, 1928, he reported “I saw a sparrowhawk (Bluish) fly from me into a black



locust tree in which were possibly ten field larks. They did not seem to mind his presence.” On New Year’s Day in 1929, McIlwaine found another American Kestrel in town and then sighted one again a week later on 8 January. On September 12, 1929, he noted that “A pair of sparrowhawks frequented an oak in these open fields.” McIlwaine also confirmed that the “Sparrowhawk” was a local breeding bird.

From 1950 to 1951, Will Hon captured and banded a total of three kestrels as part of a local banding study. He successfully used a Mourning Dove trap-line as bait,



Kestrel nestlings in Charlotte’s NoDa neighborhood.
(Tom Sanders)

though generally, a dove would be an unusually large prey for a kestrel. In 1958, Becky Norwood described an encounter she witnessed between a kestrel and an accipiter in her Charlotte neighborhood a few days after Christmas:

As I was walking toward home (in a built-up residential neighborhood), I noticed two birds flying rather high. As they circled and turned, I began to realize that they were hawks. At times they would dive at each other as if chasing one another. Finally the light was just right for me to see the rufous color on the tail of one of these birds. That and the pointed falcon-like wings clinched the identification as a Sparrow Hawk. The other hawk approximately the same size but different in contour and color. It had short rounded wings and a rather long slim tail with a dark band near the tip; the whole underside was light in color. I felt that it was an accipiter and, because of the small size, concluded that it must be a Sharp-shinned Hawk. This bird apparently was successful in driving the Sparrow Hawk away. At least the falcon left first, and then the accipiter receded into the distance. This cavorting continued long enough for me to reach home, go in for binoculars, come back outdoors, and see them well enough to give the above description.

A “Sparrowhawk” was one of 71 species documented on Mecklenburg County’s first Spring Bird Count on May 12, 1940. The bird was seen in Davidson. Since that time, kestrels have been recorded on 21 spring counts out of a total of 50 with an average of less than one bird per count and with a high count of 5 birds (possibly including a family group) reported in 1985. A look at Charlotte Christmas Bird Count data indicates the American Kestrel ranks 65th out of 110 total species,



American Kestrel. (Phil Fowler)

with only 0.10 birds per party-hour recorded over the past 20 count years.

The American Kestrel is a cavity-nesting species. In rural areas they will often choose to nest in a hole in a tree, but they cannot excavate their own holes. They rely on natural cavities or on holes excavated by woodpeckers. In urban areas they will nest in holes in buildings, under eaves, or on covered ledges. Kestrels have even been known to nest under rooftop air-conditioning units or in abandoned cars when no other suitable cavities or ledges are available.

According to the American Kestrel Partnership, data derived from several national bird studies including Breeding Bird Surveys, indicate American Kestrel populations have been in serious decline nationwide for over the past three decades. No one truly understands exactly why this decline is occurring. Several factors including habitat loss, pesticides in the environment, and increased competition for the natural cavities they need for nesting, are each believed to play a significant role. Collisions with cars is another cause impacting the survival of the kestrel as many of these birds hunt their prey along roadsides. A final cause may be the resurgence of the population of the Cooper’s Hawk, an accipiter known to prey on the kestrel. The breeding population of the American Kestrel in North Carolina is now listed as “Significantly Rare,” meaning the species exists in small numbers, and their nest sites need monitoring.

In June of 1982, David Wright reported a pair of kestrels nesting on the campus of Davidson College. Dick Brown confirmed a pair nesting in downtown Charlotte during the summer of 1983. In 1986, Brown received reports of kestrels breeding in several areas including “Charlotte, Lexington, Hickory, Huntersville, Spencer,” Iredell County, and more. Brown also reported young kestrels being found at the Cowan’s Ford Dam on the Lincoln County line. Displaced young were received at the Carolina Raptor Center from the Lowe’s Motor Speedway. On May 23, 1988, a kestrel nest was found in Charlotte on the campus of Central Piedmont Community College near center city. One male fledgling and two female fledglings were present and the youngest female still had downy feathers. An adult was observed feeding what appeared to be a lizard to the young. Additional downtown nesting locations in the late 1980s included Covenant Presbyterian Church, Gateway Center, and at least two warehouse sites. Also, an active nest was discovered in the press box on the football field at North Mecklenburg High School.

In the late 1990s, a pair of American Kestrels were regular visitors during several seasons of Carolina Panthers games at Bank of America Stadium. In between the football action, fans could watch the kestrels soaring and hovering above the stands in pursuit of the hundreds of insects attracted to the floodlights. Local birders were sure the birds had nested somewhere in the area, but no nest site was ever located. In 2005, they were reported

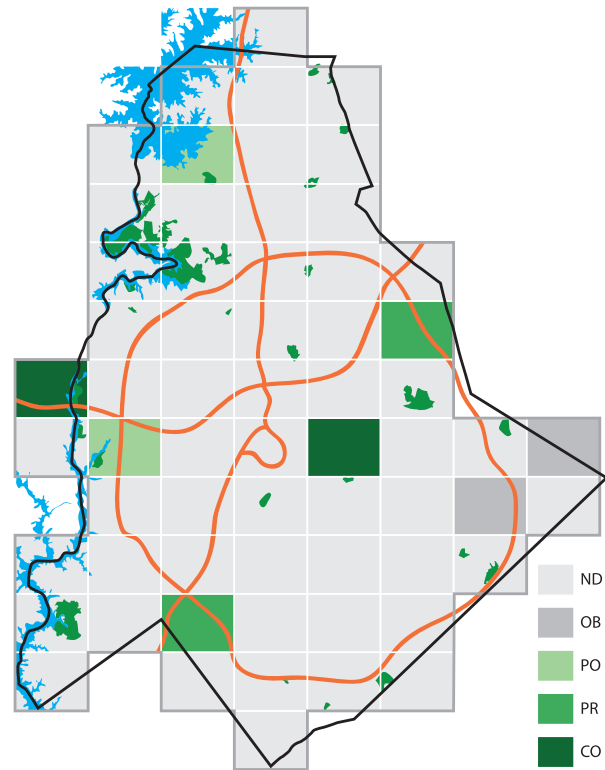
perching on the Skycam wire. On March 3, 2011, Greg Hays watched a pair of American Kestrels foraging above the Johnson and Wales University building in center Charlotte about four blocks away from the stadium.

Today, this beautiful falcon is a rare find throughout most of the region during the breeding season. Systematic surveys conducted as part of the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas confirmed only two breeding locations in the county. In 2012, Bill Archer discovered a pair breeding in a hole in the side of a vacant industrial building at ReVenture Park (a Brownfield redevelopment property and former EPA Superfund site) situated alongside the Catawba River. The pair appeared to have successfully fledged at least one young bird that year.

In 2013, Tom and Tammy Sanders found an active American Kestrel nest with three young in the NoDa district of Charlotte. The nest was situated in a cavity under the eaves of an apartment building. Sanders later installed a nest box on a wall nearby and worked with the building managers to insure the nest site would not be destroyed. This nest was in a heavily urbanized area and less than 100 feet from a multi-track railway. It is interesting to note that the second dated nest record for kestrel in North Carolina was confirmed in Greensboro in 1902, only 15 feet from a railroad track.

In 2013, Jan and Phil Fowler kept tabs on a breeding pair they found at the Pinnacle Shopping Center off Mallard Creek Church Road near I-85. Adults were observed feeding fledged young on June 30, 2013, but the actual location of the nest was never confirmed. One additional nest location was designated as “possible” during the atlas survey. Ron Clark noted the presence of two or more American Kestrels at or near the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport during breeding season, and Taylor Piephoff observed a kestrel carrying a large

insect there on June 8, 2014, and noted: “It disappeared behind some trees before I could determine where it ended up.” Kestrels were also present at the airport each winter. Unfortunately, since these sightings were reported, the airport has demolished several unused outbuildings that were possible nest sites.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Local (PR/2, CO/2)