

Local Bird Profiles: a Small but Aggressive Falcon

By Larry Hyslop



A female kestrel on a falconer's glove, photo by Larry Selman at MostlyBirds.com

The kestrel is common around Elko, and I'd bet most of us see this small bird on a regular basis. This dove-sized raptor is often sitting on telephone lines or fence posts.

Although difficult to really see without stopping to study it, this is a colorful bird. Starting at the male's brown-topped head, bold black stripes drop down its white face. The brown back has black spots, as does the light brown chest and belly. The pointed wings are gray-black and the long tail is brown. Females lack only the gray-black wings. Its aggressive call is usually described as "killy, killy, killy".

This bird is the smallest falcon in the North American family, but it is a fierce predator. Its official name used to be sparrow hawk, believing that it mainly killed and ate small birds. Now, we know small mammals and especially insects make up most of its diet, although it can take sparrow-sized birds.

It is a unique falcon in that it can hover. This bird watches for prey from its perch, standing erect like a small hawk. It swoops down near the ground and can then stay in place by rapidly flapping its wings or by gliding into the wind at such a slow speed that it stays in place as it searches the ground for prey. Food is snatched from the ground, although it can grab prey from the air also. Grasshoppers and crickets are favorite summer food.

For ages, falcons have been used in the sport of falconry and this includes kestrels. A web site called kestrelfalconry.com shows these small falcons being flown by humans. Videos show kestrels being exercised by chasing lures swung around the head of the falconer. Only when the kestrel returns to the person's hand to give it scale, does the viewer see this obvious falcon's small size.

Other videos show kestrels hunting from a falconer's glove. As he walks through tall grass, a grasshopper flies up and is quickly chased and seized by the kestrel. Other videos show the kestrel hunting mice and starlings.

The web site also describes kestrels hunting house sparrows on farms, in McDonald's parking lots and even back yards. Hmmm, I wonder if I could hire a falconer and kestrel for my backyard house sparrow problem.

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