

American Kestrel — a very pretty, expert hunter

BY BRUCE MCCAMMON

Known by the Wenatchi/P'Squosa peoples as "Liklik," the American Kestrel is America's smallest falcon.

Falcons are known for their flight speed. The Peregrine Falcon is the fastest bird in the world, capable of diving at 175 miles per hour.

The American Kestrel is much slower as it hunts for prey on the ground.

They prefer to watch from high perches and

are commonly seen on power or telephone wires. If perches are not readily available, they will hover as they scan the ground for small mammals, birds or reptiles.

Once prey is seen, the American Kestrel will quickly swoop in for the catch. My experience watching them tells me that they rarely miss.

Classified as a medium-sized bird, kestrels are 9-16 inches in length (tip to tail) — about the size of a Mourning Dove.

They are, perhaps, one of the prettiest birds we get to see. They have a distinctive dark stripe extending down from their eyes, like black tears. A second dark slash extends from behind the eye and down to the shoulder. Their breast tends toward an orange color and has spots. The male kestrel have slate-blue wings while the female's wings are reddish brown.



Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.



American Kestrel: They watch, watch, watch and then swoop.

I have seen American Kestrels in every state of the United States that I've visited. Most of the time, they will be found outside urban areas where there is a reduced threat.

I have a friend in the Denver, Colorado area, however, that is lucky to watch them nest through a window in her house. Because they are fairly common birds, some orchardists encourage them to nest in their orchards as a deterrent to birds that damage their fruit.

I found this male kestrel

hunting over a small retention pond in my neighborhood and watched as it flew out to hunt and return to the oak tree along the road.

I went home to grab my camera and tripod, hoping that the bird would remain long enough to get a few images. Cars were going by and people were stopping near the tree to access their mail. I figured that my chances were slim but a kestrel on vegetation is always worth the try.

I returned to find the bird still sitting at the top of the oak

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scanning the area around the dry pond. I set the tripod up and waited for the bird to pose so that its eye caught the sun to create a nice catch-light.

The bird kept up its routine and appeared to be totally unconcerned about me or other activity in the area. I took photos until I knew I'd exhausted the opportunity.

I'm sure that people driving by were wondering about what I was doing but I had a smile on my face as I walked the short distance back to my house. If people only knew what was openly visible to them.

Keep your eyes on the power lines as you drive around our area. If you see a bird with a plump-looking body and long, bobbing tail, slow down (safely) and look closely as you go by. If you can, stop to look at the bird using your binoculars.

If you're lucky, the bird will be in nice light and you'll have your camera along. Grab the shot. Maybe next time you'll be lucky enough to find one perched on something natural. Good luck.

If you want to learn about the important role that the Kestrel, Liklik, plays in local Native American lore, pick up a copy of the book *Red Star and Blue Star Defeat Spexman* by Randy Lewis and William Layman. Copies are available for sale at the Wenatchee Valley Museum and Cultural Center.