

American Kestrel

The American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), formerly known as the sparrow hawk, is North America's smallest falcon. About the size of a blue jay, kestrels can often be seen in farm fields and along open roadways, perched on a branch or wire scouting for prey. You can conserve habitat for kestrels by providing their preferred habitat and mounting nest boxes to boost their reproductive success.

Kestrel Natural History

Both male and female kestrels have rusty-colored tails and backs with black barring. The wings of the female also have the rust and black color pattern, while the wings of the male are blue-gray.

Range and Cover

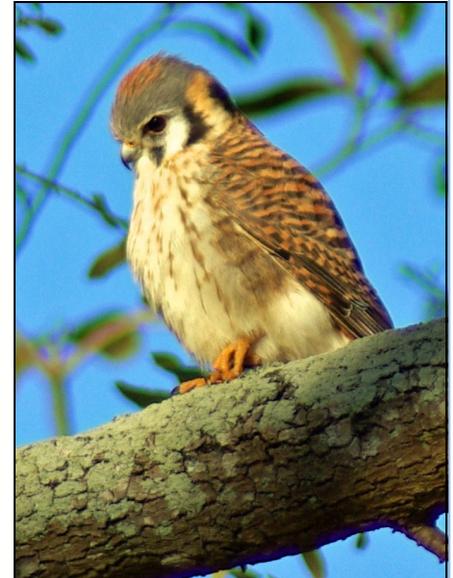
American kestrels can be found in North, Central, and South America from the tree line boundary in Alaska and Canada south to Tierra del Fuego. Kestrels prefer open country, and their habitat includes unforested mountainsides up to 1300 feet, grasslands, savannas, deserts, farmlands, and even suburban and urban environments. Kestrel movements, though not well understood, have been studied through the recovery of banded birds. Kestrels in the northern part of the breeding range migrate as far south as Central America to Panama, with the northernmost kestrels wintering the farthest south. Kestrels in more southern populations are less migratory.

Diet

Kestrels are generalist predators, feeding on large insects, small mammals, such as mice and voles, sparrow-sized birds, and, in some places, reptiles and amphibians. Kestrels often hover in flight before swooping sharply to the ground to capture prey.

Breeding Habits

American Kestrels are monogamous. Pairing begins approximately four weeks prior to egg laying. The male establishes a nesting territory and is joined later by the female, who may move among several territorial males before choosing a mate. The male, or sometimes the female, will try to attract a potential mate's attention by exhibiting a series of power dives from high above the territory. When pairs form, courtship feeding, where the male presents food to the female, becomes frequent.



*America's smallest falcon...
the kestrel is the size of a bluejay!*

American Kestrels are almost exclusively cavity nesters and will use a natural hole in a tree, a woodpecker's hole, a nest box, a cavity in a bank or cliff, or an enclosed space in a building. On rare occasions, kestrels may use an old stick nest of another bird, especially the enclosed nests of magpies.

Kestrels lay four to five, white to reddish-brown spotted eggs each year. Incubation generally begins with the second to last egg laid, and lasts about one month. While the female incubates the eggs, the male provides her with food. When the young are born, both parents tend them until they are ready to leave the nest at 28 to 30 days old. Fledglings continue to be dependent on their parents for food for two to three more weeks.

Conservation

As open space in the United States becomes increasingly developed, kestrel habitat and nest sites dwindle. Many cavity-nesting birds now compete heavily for available nest sites. You can help to ensure kestrel nesting success by mounting and monitoring a kestrel nest box in suitable habitat. Farm fields, parks, golf courses, open lots, and highways with grassy rights-of-way are all potential nest sites for kestrels.

The attached nest box design details the appropriate dimensions for American kestrel nest boxes. White pine or cedar is recommended. If you choose to paint the box, use an earth-tone paint to allow boxes to blend in with the environment and only paint the outside of the box.

Attach the box to a post, tree, or side of a building, 10 to 30 feet above the ground. If you are putting up more than one box, space them about one mile from each other to meet kestrel territorial requirements.



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Checking and Maintaining Nest Boxes

Nest boxes should be checked at least three or four times each year. The first visit should occur in late winter or early spring before the kestrels begin territory establishment. At this time, clean out the nest box and make any needed repairs. Place three or four inches of wood chips, wood shavings, or straw in the bottom of each box for nesting material.

During the nesting season, visit the box two or three times. This will help you identify whether the box is being used by kestrels. European starlings often nest in kestrel nest boxes. Starlings replace or cover wood chips with grass and other material and lay five to seven pale blue eggs. If they are found nesting, remove the nest and replace it with a new layer of wood chips.

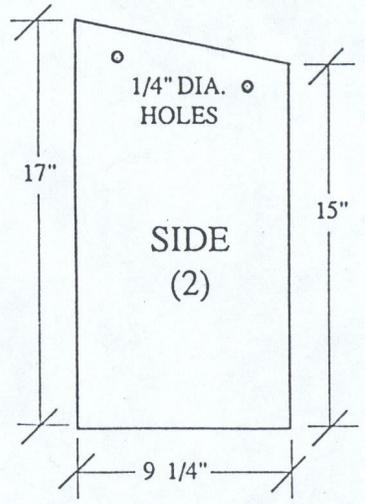
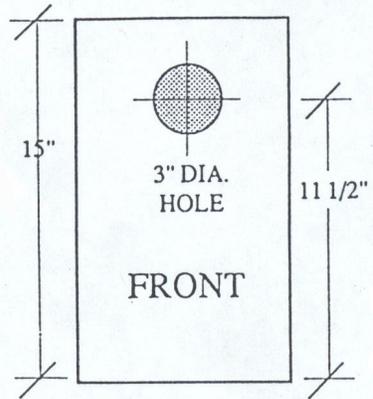
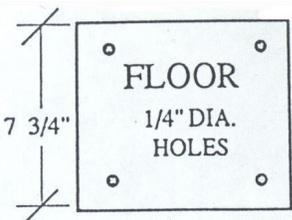
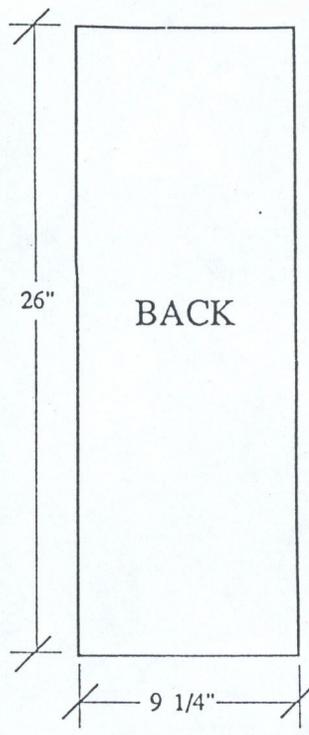
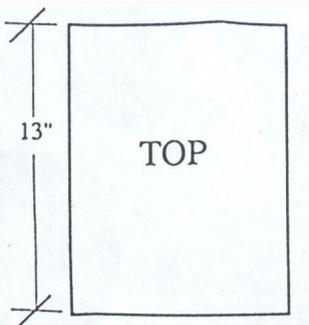
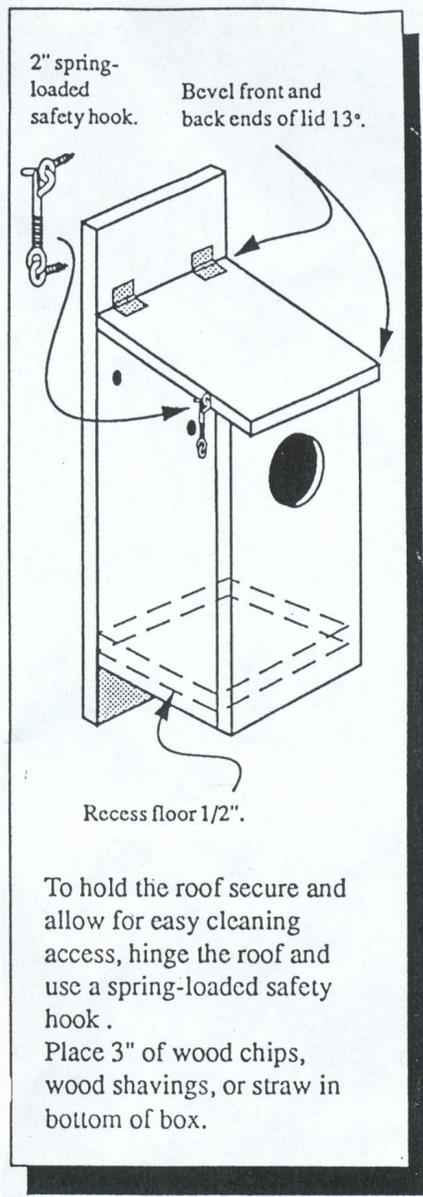
The only time to avoid checking a kestrel nest box is during the first two weeks of their 30-day incubation period. Kestrels are especially sensitive to disturbance at this time. To determine whether the young kestrels have successfully left a nest box, one visit should occur within five days of their expected departure. The last visit should be made in late summer after nesting is complete. Remove old nesting material at this time.

Keep records for each box you put up to help evaluate the success of individual nest boxes and your nest box program. Audubon International conducts a yearly nest box survey and we appreciate hearing about your results.

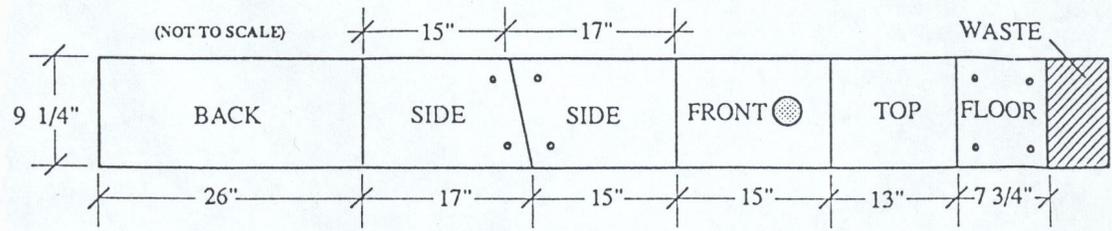
HELPFUL WEB SITES

USGS American Kestrel Facts:
www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/id/framlst/i3600id.html

Cornell Lab of Ornithology:
www.nestwatch.org



LUMBER: One 1" x 10" x 8' 0", (#2 white pine recommend). Painting the box will increase its useful life.
HARDWARE: Twenty-two 1 1/2" wood screws (#6), two 2" hinges and one 2" spring-loaded safety hook.



PM 488A 9-5-91