

American Kestrel

Falco sparverius

The American Kestrel is widely distributed in the Western Hemisphere in both North and South America. Birds from the colder northern portions of North America are migratory, and males apparently winter farther north than females (Willoughby and Cade 1964). Kestrels frequent farmlands (especially where large numbers of elms killed by Dutch elm disease have been left standing), woodland edges, suburban areas, and cities. Balgooyen (1976) cited four factors that limit kestrel populations: availability of hunting perches, of food, of nest sites, and of open, low vegetation for foraging. Because the species nests in cavities, nest sites constitute a major limiting factor among breeding populations. The species may be more common in Vermont now than it was in the early 1900s when Allen (1909) listed it as an uncommon resident.

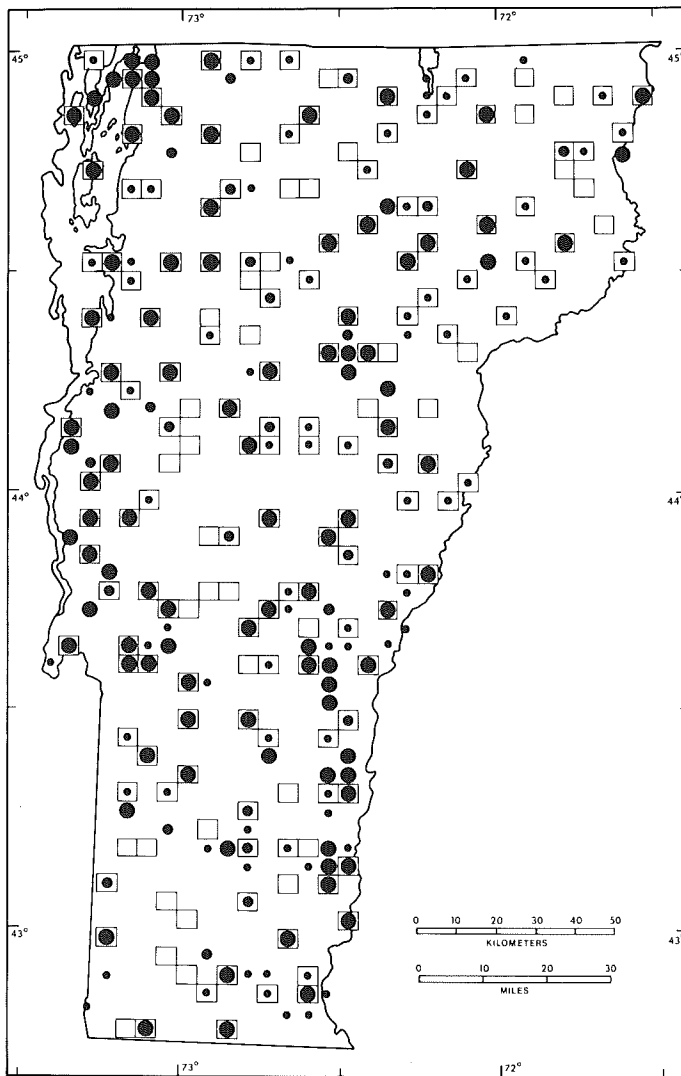
American Kestrels are frequently seen perched on dead trees, fences, and power lines along roads, or in direct flight or hovering high over open areas. The nesting sites are generally cavities in dead trees; the species will frequently utilize cavities excavated by the Northern Flicker. Other sites that may be used include silos, birdhouses, and crevices in buildings. Because the nest is often in a conspicuous dead tree or around human habitation, it is much easier to locate than those of other birds of prey. About 43% of Vermont Atlas Project nesting confirmations for the species involved the observation of an active nest. The young, once fledged, may be very noisy, giving the characteristic treble whine of the species when begging for food. Thirty-nine percent of the confirmations referred to recently fledged young.

Kestrels winter at the lower elevations in Vermont, and are recorded regularly in small numbers in the Champlain Lowlands and occasionally in the Connecticut River valley. The species is not reported from the colder, more heavily wooded Green Moun-



tains and Northeast Highlands, both of which are subject to deep snow cover that limits prey availability. In areas where kestrels do not winter they first appear in late March; the spring migration extends through April.

In Vermont American Kestrels are often seen mating and searching for nest holes by the first week of April. Sixteen Vermont dates for nests with eggs vary from April 28 to May 30. The eggs are white to pale pink with heavy rufous spotting that does not quite obscure the base color, as it does on the eggs of other falcons. Clutch size ranges from 3 to 7 eggs; the average of 14 Vermont sets was 5.1. Balgooyen (1976) reported that the average clutch size was 4 eggs. The incubation period lasts about 30 days, with a range of 29 to 31 days (Balgooyen 1976). Ten dates for nests with young for Vermont range from May 29 to July 4. The young remain in the nest from 29 to 31 days (Balgooyen 1976). Ten Vermont dates for dependent young range from June 19 to July 16. The young remain dependent on their parents for food for about 12 days after fledging (Balgooyen 1976). Family groups remain together until early autumn, when the young are the first to depart from the breeding territory (Balgooyen 1976). In Vermont the largest numbers of migratory kestrels are



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 140 (78%)

Possible breeding: 51 (36.5% of total)
 Probable breeding: 17 (12.0% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 72 (51.5% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	31	100	22.1
Green Mountains	32	59	23.0
North Central	17	89	12.1
Northeast Highlands	10	63	7.1
East Central	16	84	11.4
Taconic Mountains	14	88	10.0
Eastern Foothills	20	83	14.3

seen during the second and third weeks of September. The American Kestrel is usually the fourth most common hawk seen on Vermont watches.

The American Kestrel was found and confirmed in all seven physiographic regions of Vermont. It was recorded in more than 80% of the priority blocks in five regions, and 100% of the priority blocks in the Champlain Lowlands. As might be expected, it was recorded in fewer priority blocks in the Green Mountains and in the Northeast Highlands, where it is absent from large tracts of unbroken forest land. Recently the species has begun to invade some of the

larger clear cuts (where loggers have left sizeable snags) in the Northeast Highlands and the Green Mountain National Forest.

WILLIAM J. NORSE
 WALTER G. ELLISON