

Kestrels, An Iowa Legacy by Coralee Bodeker



A few years ago, a short drive down my gravel road would yield at least one, if not two, American Kestrels perched on a power line or hovering mid-air above the grassy ditch. These vibrantly colored, miniature falcons peppered the roadsides, diving into ditches whenever a car passed. Today, Iowa still hosts a breeding and wintering population of American Kestrels, but I have begun to count myself lucky to drive past a mere one kestrel per week rather than the daily sightings. This same scarcity has been occurring across the state; anecdotally, many birders are noticing fewer and fewer American Kestrels in their local areas, while hard data from formal Hawkwatch sites illustrates a steady decline. Scientists and raptor counters at Hitchcock Nature Center in Pottawattamie County (Iowa's only full-time Hawkwatch site) have recorded an overall downward trend in migrating American Kestrel populations for the past decade. In our neighboring state, the Illinois Beach State Park Hawkwatch has recorded similar data trends. To put this in perspective, despite a considerable rise in contributing datasets, Bird Studies Canada also shows a downward drift in American Kestrel numbers since the 1950s and a recent nosedive spanning the past decade—Bird Studies Canada draws these numbers from a bank of over 7.6 million North American bird surveys including

Hawkwatch counts, annual Christmas Bird Counts, FeederWatch reports, eBird surveys, and breeding bird surveys, to name a few. The decline in the American Kestrel population has been slowly looming, but it wasn't until last fall that I truly noticed the scarcity in my own area. No breeding pairs nested near my neighbor's prairie last summer for the first time in at least eight years.

Possibly the biggest hazard for American Kestrels to overcome today is the loss of their precious habitat. The once large expanses of pastures and prairies sufficient to sustain hunting American Kestrels have been crammed into roadside ditches as more and more land in Iowa is converted to farming. More importantly, however, their *nesting* sites are being diminished. American Kestrels normally nest in dead trees on the edges of open grassland, but these trees are being removed (for a variety of reasons) and local American Kestrels are scattering to the wind. This species has more recently tried moving into towns and out of the rural areas in an effort to overcome habitat loss, but in towns American Kestrels face the threat of larger birds of prey, specifically the Cooper's Hawk which will eat a kestrel.

A further danger facing American Kestrels is a decline in flying insect populations, which kestrels depend on to feed their young. A few years ago, when lowans filled their cars up with gas they routinely wiped down their windshields to clean off the copious amounts of smashed bugs, but today many lowans are finding the need for a Casey's squeegee quite unnecessary. I hadn't given this conundrum much thought until rather recently when I obtained my learner's permit to drive. A disturbing example of how an often-overlooked animal can disappear literally before our eyes.

With fewer Kestrels around my home, I wonder what has happened to their daring aerial displays, their hunting chases and jaw-dropping turns and dives I'm so used to watching? What *has* happened to the American Kestrels that once lined the roads and swooped out over the fields as cars passed? Did these birds simply disappear over the horizon to some distant state? Will the same thing happen to the American Kestrel that has already happened to so many other North American raptors, suddenly plummeting off the population charts like the Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, and Osprey did so many years ago (albeit for other reasons)? Or will insightful, smart, compassionate people step in to save the American Kestrel before that last-hour collapse? My hope is we can help the American Kestrel in time. Iowa needs American Kestrels like we need the prairies and clean water. This is Iowa. This is our legacy.

'A Prairie Girl's Notebook' is inspired by 'A Naturalist's Notebook' penned by John Schmitt & found in the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Living Bird journal.

If you would like to own a high-quality 12X16 canvas print of the American Kestrel I drew for this essay *and* support American Kestrel conservation and research at the same time, PLEASE consider participating in my eBay auction! All proceeds from the auction will be split evenly between the Pottawattamie Conservation Foundation (funds earmarked for the Hitchcock Hawkwatch) and also The Peregrine Fund's American Kestrel Partnership which works to advance conservation of the American Kestrel. The auction runs for seven days and can be found at this web address: <https://tinyurl.com/jfkf42c>

References

Chi, Dora. "Tracking Kestrels One Feather at a Time." *Audubon*. National Audubon Society, 18 Aug. 2016, www.audubon.org/news/tracking-kestrels-one-feather-time. 5 Jan. 2017.

Davis, Kate. *American Kestrel: Pint-Sized Predator*. Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2014.

HawkCount. Hawk Migration Association of North America, www.hawkcount.org. Accessed 5 Jan 2017.

NatureCounts. Bird Studies Canada, www.bsc-eoc.org/birdmon/default/main.jsp3. Accessed 5 Jan. 2017.

Toll, Jerry. Iowa Young Birders Trip to Hitchcock Hawk Watch/Hitchcock Nature Area, 24 Sept. 2016, Hitchcock Nature Center, IA. Address.