

The Master of the Wind

A Guide to the Common Kestrel (Falco tinnunculus)



The Common Kestrel is easily spotted compared to other raptors due to its eye-catching habit of hovering while hunting its prey. While other birds do hover—such as buzzards, kites, and Barn owls—it is the Kestrel that is a true expert in this activity. This captivating bird has long inspired human imagination, appearing in literature ranging from the classic children's book and film *Kes* to Gerard Manley Hopkins' atmospheric poem, *'The Windhover.'* "Windhover" is the traditional old English name for this diminutive falcon, serving as a literal and beautiful description of its hunting mastery.

The Physics of Hovering

Kestrels can hover perfectly still by rapidly flapping their wings and keeping their head completely immobile in space, adjusting their tail feathers for precise control against the wind. According to *The Wildlife Trusts*, they are so efficient that they can lock their eyes on a target while keeping their head 100% stationary, even in turbulent air.

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Ultraviolet Vision

While they are hovering, they scan the ground using a specialized superpower: the ability to see **ultraviolet (UV) light**. This allows them to see the glowing, fresh urine and faeces trails left behind by small rodents in the grass. This acts like a glowing neon map, leading them straight to their next meal.

Appearance & Scale

Kestrels are relatively compact falcons, weighing up to **250g** with a wingspan of approximately **75cm**. For an easy size comparison, they are very similar in scale to a familiar garden magpie.

- **Plumage:** They are primarily light brown in colour with distinct dark spots across their upper body.
- **Distinguishing the Sexes:** Males have a striking grey-blue head and tail, whereas females are entirely brown with dark bars across their plumage.
- **In Flight:** Their wings are sharply pointed, and their tail looks long and narrow in direct flight, contrasting with the wide, fan-shaped tail profile they exhibit while actively hovering.

Solitary Lives & Seasonal Partnerships

Kestrels are largely solitary birds that defend their hunting territories year-round. While they usually pair for life, *The Wildlife Trusts* note that they do not spend their time together outside of the breeding season, choosing to hunt independently. The pair comes back together during late winter to early spring to begin an intensive courting process.

The male takes the initiative to select a potential nesting site, such as a deep cavity or hole in a tree, an old nest built by a crow, or a cliff ledge. He then presents it to the female, who makes the final choice. Interestingly, the *RSPB* states that Kestrels build no nest structure of their own; they simply lay their eggs directly onto the bare floor of the chosen cavity.

The Breeding Cycle

Four to five eggs are typically laid in late April to early May, with each egg arriving at two-day intervals. The female carries out the vast majority of the incubation work over a period of about a month, while the male acts as the primary provider, hunting diligently to bring her food. He will also step in to perform brief incubation duties to provide a welcome 'break' for the female.

The young fledge about a month after hatching. Once they take to the air, the adults continue to carefully feed and look after the fledglings for another two to three weeks until they learn to master the complex art of hovering for themselves.

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Diet and Ideal Habitats

The Kestrel's ideal environment consists of open grassland, roadside verges, and traditional farmland. However, they are highly adaptable; the *BTO* reports that Kestrels can also be found in open green spaces within bustling towns and cities, provided they can find a steady supply of prey.

An Adaptable Generalist: While their preferred prey consists largely of field voles, Kestrels are effective opportunists. They will readily take mice, shrews, small birds, earthworms, and even large insects like beetles. Data from the *BTO* reveals that when small mammal populations crash, Kestrels in urban zones will nimbly pivot their hunting efforts towards catching house sparrows and starlings.

Conservation & Local Action

Sadly, the British population of Kestrels has declined significantly, showing a **37% drop between 1995 and 2023**. This steep downturn has resulted in their current classification on the UK **Amber List** as a bird of conservation concern. The *RSPB* attributes this decline primarily to changing agricultural practices, which have cleared away the rough, untamed grassland edges where voles live, alongside a reduction in available nesting cavities.

Help Us Protect our Kestrels

We want to actively increase the numbers of Kestrels in Malmesbury and the surrounding area. Since modern farmland lacks natural tree hollows, installing dedicated kestrel nest boxes on tall trees or poles is highly effective. If you have land with open grassland and want to support our local raptor project, please reach out!



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