



American Kestrels Residing on Horsebarn Hill

By Pamm Cooper, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

The American kestrel is a small falcon that is about the same size as a robin but differs in having a larger head and a longer tail. When it flies, it bends its wings somewhat and can be mistaken for a killdeer or a mourning dove. Its habitat is a site with large areas of open fields or grasslands. Kestrels are often seen perched on telephone wires or on fences or small farm buildings that border these open areas.

Kestrels have a rusty back and a white chest dotted with black. Males are spiffy, having slate blue wings and both sexes have a pair of vertical black slashes on white cheeks. Seen from above they appear rusty brown, while seen from below they are pale.



A hunting bird, they generally spot prey on the ground and dive in to capture it. Sometimes they will hunt in the air. Food consists mainly of insects, but small birds and rodents will also be taken. Kestrels can be seen in late summer chasing grasshoppers and dragonflies. Shorter vegetation such as mown pastures makes it easier for them to find prey.

Eggs are laid in tree cavities or pre-existing woodpecker holes, buildings with suitable nooks or nest boxes that are specifically made for them. By late April, eggs are laid and the young hatch about a month later. Males do most of the hunting for the female, while she sits on the eggs, and for the young nestlings. Adults feed the young for several weeks, and then they are on their own. One brood is raised per year.

American kestrels have been in decline here in Connecticut since 1974. Since much of our farmland has given way to housing developments, their habitat has been lost. They have been listed as a species of special concern in Connecticut since 2015.

There are areas where kestrels are still thriving, and one of them is on the University of Connecticut campus in Storrs in the fields and pastures on Horsebarn Hill. Check out any areas where there are large tracts of open fields and few trees. You may spot one perched on a telephone wire as you drive or walk along the roadside.

If you are planning to visit the Connecticut Flower & Garden Show next week, stop by our booth. Bring your horticultural queries and a half cup of soil for a free pH test. Sign up for our free monthly newsletter emailed to your inbox.

For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.