

Wild Wednesday 7 October 2020 by Walt Anderson

The American Kestrel is a familiar sight throughout the greater Granite Dells area, where we may see one perching with a grasshopper in its talons or hovering as it hunts. The species occurs from northern Alaska all the way to Tierra del Fuego, making it one of the most successful of New World birds of prey.

The diurnal birds of prey fall into two orders: the Accipitriformes (hawks, eagles, kites, and the like) and the Falconiformes (falcons and caracaras). DNA and morphological studies have revealed that these two orders are not closely related. It's a classic case of convergence, where unrelated species appear similar because of similar habits (that is, a predatory lifestyle while hunting during daylight). In fact, falcons are more closely related to parrots and songbirds than they are to hawks and eagles!

For years, this bird was called the Sparrow Hawk, which was a total misnomer, as it is not closely related to "sparrow hawks" around the world; those are accipiters like our Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks. Because it hovers like many of the Old World kestrels, it was renamed the American Kestrel. Oops—recent studies have shown that it is more closely related to other New World falcons like Prairie, Peregrine, and Aplomado Falcons than it is to the Old World kestrels. Some have called this another case of convergence, but since all falcons are related, a better term is parallel evolution. Will we rename it again to avoid confusion with Old World kestrels? Probably not, as once a name is widely used, taxonomic inertia sets in.

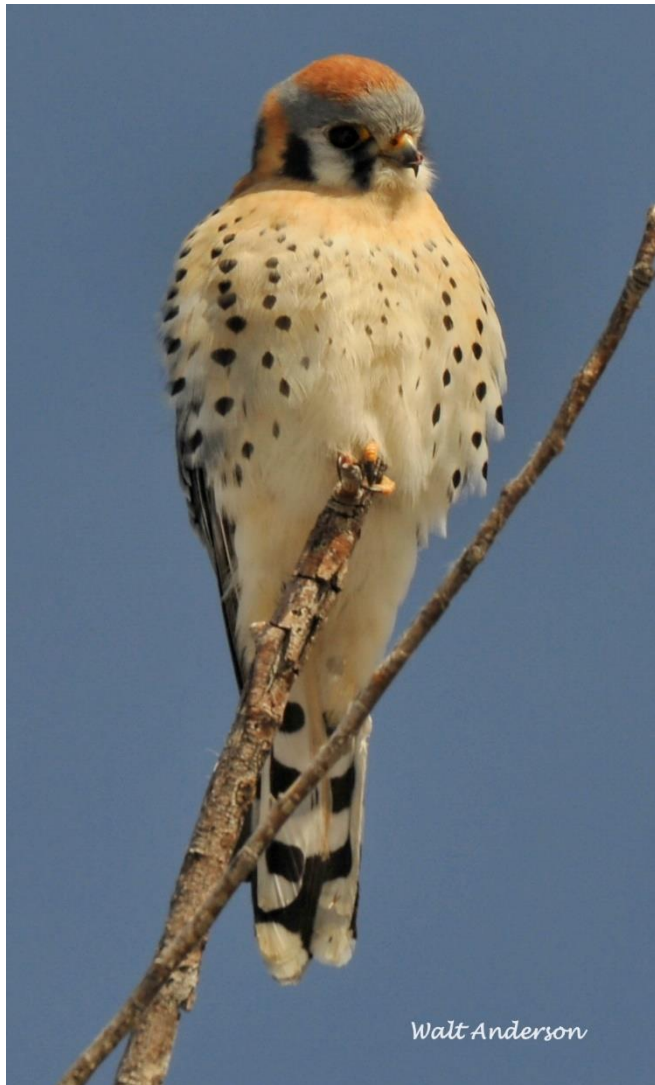
The only other falcon likely to be confused with this is the Merlin, a northern breeder that migrates through and winters in Arizona. In flight, however, they are completely different. The Merlin is a fighter jet compared to the crop duster kestrel, which can get by on much less fuel and thereby thrive in habitats that could not sustain the high-energy Merlin.

In the photos, I will describe male and female American Kestrel and show a couple of the African kestrels for comparison. These fascinating birds are well worth some sustained watching and listening (their "killy killy" call is always fun to hear).

The quality of life for us and those who follow in this human community depends a lot on our willingness to protect large, interconnected natural open space to support our wild neighbors. The Granite Dells offers our best chance to have a world-class preserve in the midst of a vibrant urban area.



A pair of American Kestrels showing the distinctive breast patterns: spotted for the male and streaked for the female. Females are larger than males.



Male American Kestrel showing spotted breast. Not shown are the bluish wings and rusty upper surface of tail.



This captive female kestrel shows her streaked breast. Note the circular nostril with bony tubercle inside and the notched beak, which is used to kill prey (hawks typically kills with their talons).



Where did that feather come from?



American Kestrel mobbing a Barn Owl. Kestrels despite their diminutive size, are quite aggressive in harassing larger raptors.



Greater Kestrel, which we see on our Tanzania safaris. Since this name is taken, we can't make American Great again.



Lesser Kestrel, sometimes in large flocks in the Serengeti in East Africa, having come south for the winter from Eurasia.



Handsome male American Kestrel showing his blue wings (but don't mistake him for a Blue-winged Teal).