

## The American Kestrel: A Small Falcon with a Big Role in Our Valley

The American kestrel is North America's smallest falcon, about the size of a robin, but their role in our ecosystem is anything but small. This striking raptor, with its rusty-red back and slate-blue speckled wings, are beloved not only for their vivid plumage and graceful flight, but also for the work they do in keeping local insect and rodent populations in check. Their diet is seasonal—grasshoppers and beetles in the summer, mice and voles in the fall and winter—making them a natural ally to gardeners and farmers.

Although not currently listed as endangered, kestrel populations have been declining in parts of the country, including Ohio. Habitat loss, lack of nesting cavities, and increased pesticide use are all contributing factors. These falcons prefer open fields with scattered trees, a landscape once common in Ohio but increasingly fragmented. Fortunately, our own Chagrin River Valley—rich with open meadows, riparian woodlots, and quiet rural edges—still provides ideal habitat.

One of the biggest challenges kestrels face is finding safe places to nest. They rely on natural cavities in trees or old buildings to raise their young, and as those opportunities dwindle, so do their numbers. That's where conservation groups and caring communities like ours can make a real difference. Conservation leaders at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary and their "Nestboxes for American Kestrels" program have shown that by installing and maintaining nestboxes in suitable habitats, volunteers have helped kestrels return to areas where they had vanished.

It can take up to several years for kestrels to discover the box. They establish nesting territories in early March and by early June they have a "clutch" of 3-5 eggs or more. The eggs are spherical and smooth with non-glossy white, cream or pink color with cinnamon speckling. Female incubation is roughly 30 days, plus 15 to 20 days of brooding (keeping warm) the hatched nestlings, while the male kestrel provides food.

Kestrels, including their eggs, are protected by state and federal law, so observation should be 50-75 feet away from the nesting box.