
AMERICAN KESTREL (*FALCO SPARVERIUS*) APPARENTLY ATTEMPTING TO CATCH SMALL FISH

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Abstract -- A female American Kestrel peered into water, hovered three times and plunged into the water four times, apparently without catching prey. Small fish were moving conspicuously in the water at the time.

Key words: American Kestrel, diet, *Falco sparverius*, foraging, Iona Island, salt water.

The diet of the American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) is highly varied, consisting mainly of crickets and grasshoppers when and where these are abundant, rodents in some areas, and small birds in others (Audubon 1844; Bent 1937; Sharrod 1978; Palmer 1988; Smallwood and Bird 2002). This note documents a kestrel apparently attempting to catch fish.

On 16 August 1999 I was birding at the outer end of the south arm jetty on Iona Island in southwestern B.C. The jetty consists of two 4 m. diameter concrete pipes, partly sunk into gravel with a gravel road along their south side extending 4 km. out from the shoreline into Georgia Strait. I watched a female kestrel which had been frequenting the jetty for the last week, for almost two hours, from 14:15 until a little after 16:00, in good light and from only 10 to 12 m. distance. There is ample weedy growth along the length of the jetty, with many grasshoppers, likely Carolina Grasshoppers (*Dissosteira carolina*), and numerous other unidentified insects, so there was no shortage of food. I was standing on the viewing platform at the western tip of the jetty approximately 4 m. above the road surface, when the kestrel flew in and perched on a rock overlooking the water's edge below me. After a short time, it was apparent that something in the water had captured her interest, as she peered intently at the surface about 2 m. below her and on three occasions flew up and hovered perhaps 3 m. above it. Each time she settled back on to the same rock perch. Twice while hovering she dropped to almost touch the water surface before returning to her perch. Then to my astonishment, the bird dropped straight off the rock with wings partly unfolded to land belly deep in saltwater and immediately back out again. The bird evidently did not greatly enjoy the sensation of cold water because she spent considerable time vigorously shaking each leg in turn, and carefully drying and preening breast and belly feathers. However, this plunge into shallow water was repeated three times over the next 45 or 50 minutes and each time the leg shaking, preening ritual was carried out. Apparently, none of the immersions gained her any prey, as I could see none through scope or binoculars during the leg and foot shaking. Finally, after another prolonged period of watching the water, the bird flew off back along the jetty.

I immediately walked down to the rock on which she had been perched and also peered down into the water, which was perhaps 5 to 8 cm. deep on a rocky bottom. There were several tiny fish there, only 3 cm. long, but flashing silvery in the sunlight as they moved. This was almost certainly what had attracted the kestrel's attention.

Audubon (1844) listed field mice, crickets and grasshoppers as principal prey, while Bent (1937) mentioned the diet as varying considerably according to season and locality. Palmer (1988) detailed a wide variety of prey items caught or scavenged using a variety of foraging techniques. Although most prey items documented have been terrestrial animals (Sharrod 1978; Palmer 1988; Smallwood and Bird 2002), kestrels are known to eat aquatic and semi-aquatic animals. One of Bent's correspondents described a captive female that "would touch no food except living frogs which she killed, eating only the contents of the abdominal cavity." Kestrels wintering in Florida include crayfish in their diet (Sibley 2001). The only published account of American Kestrels eating fish is that of Parkhurst and Brooks (1988), who observed a kestrel take a fingerling Brook Trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) from a Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) and capture another fingerling tossed inadvertently on to grass by hatchery workers. Both of these incidents represented opportunistic seizures of prey, and foraging attempts by American Kestrels directed at fish appear not to have been documented previously.

I believe that the kestrel made the attempts to catch the fish only because the movement and reflections had attracted her. Her lack of success may reflect an inability of a normally terrestrial hunting bird to focus on underwater prey, a challenge even to habitual aerial predators of fish, such as terns (Erichsen 1985). The closely related and ecologically similar Eurasian Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) has been observed to attempt to catch fish at least three times (Batten 1959; Mountford 1975), only one of which was successful (Batten 1959).

The presence of fish at the site of this observation suggests that the hovering and plunging by the kestrel represented attempted predation rather than bathing. No information is available on bathing in the wild by this

species (Smallwood and Bird 2002), and bathing in salt water seems unlikely. Furthermore, other species, such as terns that hover and plunge-dive for food regularly do not hover above the water prior to landing on it for bathing bouts.

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