

FALCONS — FAMILY FALCONIDAE

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*

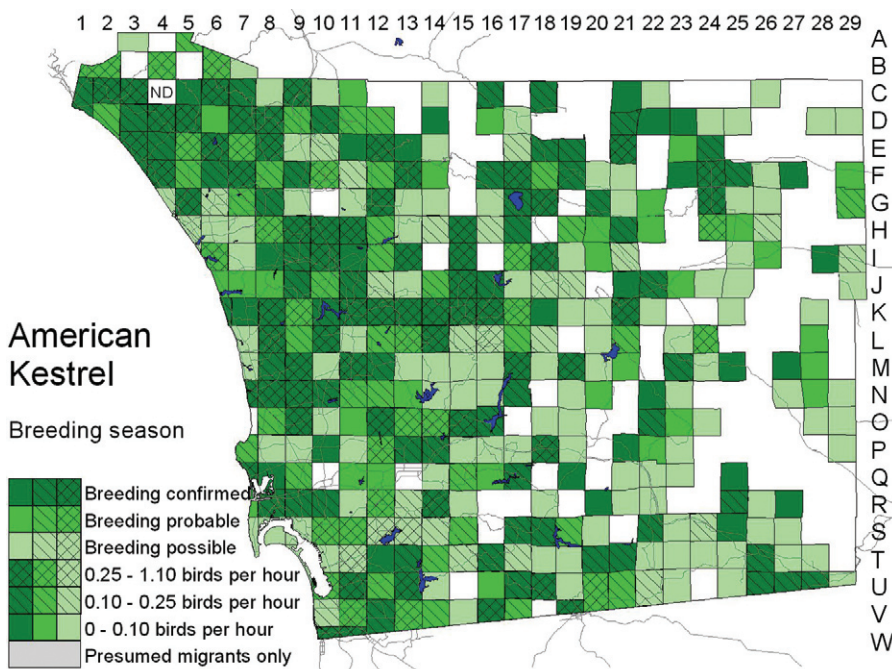
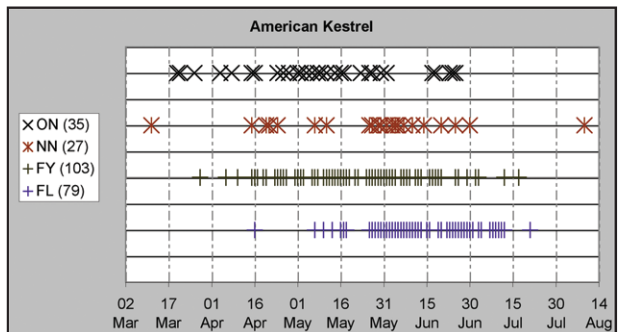
Ideal habitat for the American Kestrel is a grove of tall sycamore or oak trees, which offer cavities for nests, adjacent to grassland or open ground, where the birds can forage. In the Anza-Borrego Desert a few kestrels nest in niches in eroded bluffs. The kestrel has also become a fairly successful urban adapter by nesting among the leaf bases of palms. It is a year-round resident in San Diego County but more numerous in winter, with the arrival of migrants from the north.

Breeding distribution: The American Kestrel is widespread in San Diego County but most numerous in valley floors and broad canyons on the coastal slope. Our counts during the breeding season ranged up to 13 (including fledglings) near Rincon (F13) 12 June 1999 (S. L. Breisch, J. M. Hargrove), but generally the kestrel must be rated uncommon as a breeding bird in San Diego County, as only slightly over 1% of our daily totals in spring or summer were of over six individuals. In regions of extensive unbroken chaparral and at higher elevations the kestrel is sparse or lacking. Nevertheless, it nests at least as high as 4500 feet on Palomar Mountain (D14; active nest on 24 June 1997, P. D. Jorgensen) and in the Laguna Mountains (N22; fledgling on 7 July 2001, G. L. Rogers), probably as high as 5500 feet around Laguna Meadow (O23; pair and probable nest 21 June 1997, A. E. Klovstad, C. L. Mann). The kestrel is absent from much of the Anza-Borrego Desert but breeds in small numbers at oases like Lower Willows (D23), Butterfield Ranch (M23), and Vallecito (M25), in developed areas, and in the Borrego and Carrizo badlands.



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Nesting: Over most of the kestrel's range it nests in tree cavities, either excavated by woodpeckers or resulting from decay. Such sites are common in San Diego County as well. But where fan palms or the Canary Island date palm have been planted, kestrels nest in the crevices



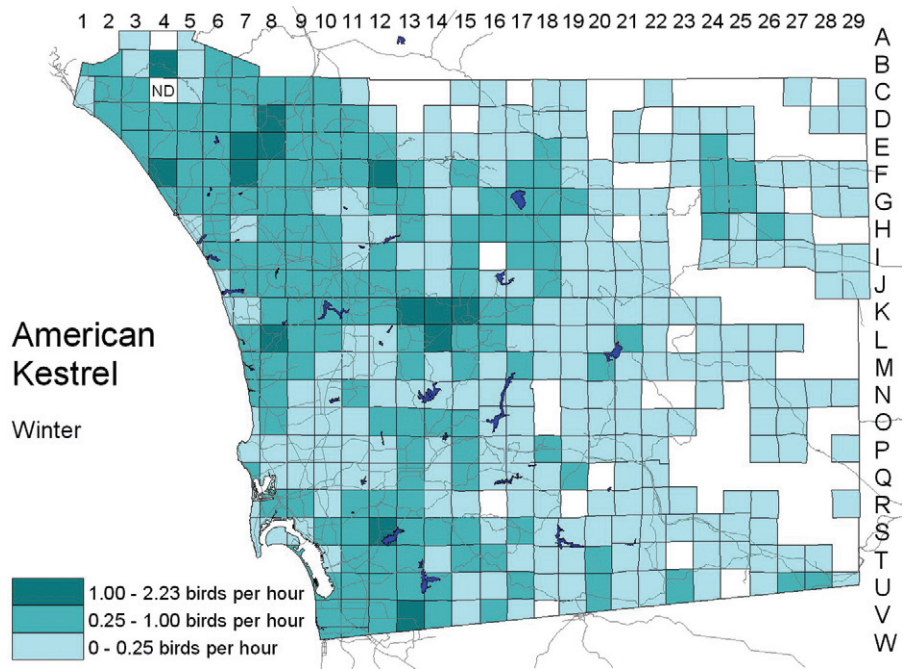
among the leaf bases or under the skirts of dead leaves. Atlas observers described nests in palms more frequently than any other type of site. Other man-made sites we observed were the hollow arms of power poles, the aircraft-warning spheres hung on power lines, an abandoned building, and the eaves of the headquarters building for the Ocotillo Wells state off-road vehicle area (I28; nestlings on 24 April 1997, J. Rudley). Kestrels commonly use nest boxes if good hunting habitat is nearby (J. L. Lincer). We did not see the actual nests, but evidently the kestrel also uses crevices in bluffs in desert badlands. Such sites were especially likely near

Font's Point (F27; male carrying prey toward cliffs 1 May 1999, G. Rebstock, K. Forney) and between June Wash and Arroyo Tapiado (M27; male carrying lizard 26 April 2000, R. Thériault). One egg set collected at La Jolla (P7) in 1935 was from a hole in a sandstone bluff, and another from an unspecified location was from a granite cliff.

Dates of kestrel eggs collected in San Diego County 1894–1952 range from 21 March to 30 May, and the great majority of our observations 1997–2001 conform with this interval. A few, however, are earlier. Fledged young northwest of Santa Ysabel (I18) 16 April 2000 (S. E. Smith) imply egg laying as early as mid February; a nest with four nestlings in Los Peñasquitos Canyon (N8) 11 March 2000 (L. D. and R. Johnson) implies egg laying as early as late January or early February. Another nest with nestlings just a short distance up the same canyon (N9) 9 August 1999 (A. G. and D. Stanton) implies laying as late as mid June. This pattern prevails among many raptors (Wildlife Research Institute 2004).

Migration: Though there is a winter influx of kestrels into San Diego County, the only concentration of migrants noted is of 17 in Blair Valley and 5 in nearby Little Blair Valley (L24) 9 April 1999 (R. Thériault).

Winter: The kestrel is even more widespread in winter (recorded in 396 atlas squares) than in the breeding season (recorded in 366 atlas squares). The pattern of winter distribution is similar, but the birds are even more concentrated in grassland. Our highest rate of encounter with the species was in the Santa Maria Valley on the northwest side of Ramona (K14). The factor affecting the variation in the number of kestrels from winter to winter is most likely the supply of prey as determined by rainfall. We found the species at the same relatively high rate in the wet winter of 1997–98 as well as the following year. Then in dry 2000–01 and 2001–02 the rate dropped to



54–62% what it had been at the beginning of the five-year atlas period.

Conservation: Christmas bird counts and historical literature from San Diego County suggest the kestrel population has been fairly stable through time, though the Breeding Bird Survey suggests a trend of decline over California as a whole (Sauer et al. 2003). The species has gained foraging habitat through the clearing of chaparral but lost it through the paving and landscaping of open ground. The changes humanity has made to the environment have meant a net increase in nest sites, which can be limiting to a secondary cavity user like the kestrel that is large in comparison to most of the primary cavity excavators, the woodpeckers.

Taxonomy: Almost all specimens of the American Kestrel from San Diego County, including 16 recent specimens of the local breeding population taken for predator control at Least Tern colonies, are the relatively large *F. s. sparverius* Linnaeus, 1758, widespread across North America. Just one specimen from San Diego 6 November 1921 (SDNHM 2288) is small enough to represent a wanderer of the smaller *F. s. peninsularis* Mearns, 1892 (Unitt 1984).