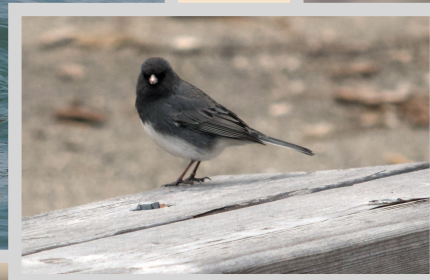




Red-breasted Merganser



Snowy Owl



Dark-eyed Junco

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## Winter Bird Notes

### *Falco sparverius* (American Kestrel)

**ORDER:** Falconiformes (3 Family)

**FAMILY:** Falconidae (65 Species)

The spring-like warm weather was welcoming this week! However, the midday sun altitude of 25° and azimuth of 180° says we are in winter. The good news is we are now gaining more light at night! Only a few more days before we reach the shortest day of the year. This is great news! Soon, we will be anticipating the warbler migration!

Duck watching was great this week! Some of the regular inhabitants along the lake were the buffleheads, greater and lesser scaups, common goldeneyes, three species of scoters, three species of mergansers, and long-tailed ducks. The American coots are starting to become scarce, likely because they are migrating further south for the colder months of the winter. I was pleasantly surprised to see a female hooded merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) at Lakeshore State Park this week. The male hooded merganser is definitely a duck to watch for because of his unique shape-shifting white patch on his head. He can flatten the white patch or flare it out like a fan. This compact, diving duck is really stunning!

I had a smiling-sensation moment when I saw a hovering bird just south of the handrail-illuminated bridge at Lakeshore State Park. I know of only a few birds that can hover, flapping their wings incessantly, and strike their prey with precision. Some examples of hovering birds are hummingbirds, terns, hawks and falcons. The hovering bird I saw was one of the smallest falcons, the American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*). Since this is a small bird weighing 3-5 oz., the flight can look buoyant like a butterfly depending on the wind speeds. They have a long, blunt tail and pointed wings that appear hunched when hovering. I will occasionally see one perched on a tall denuded tree trunk or on a street light near the prairie. When the falcon



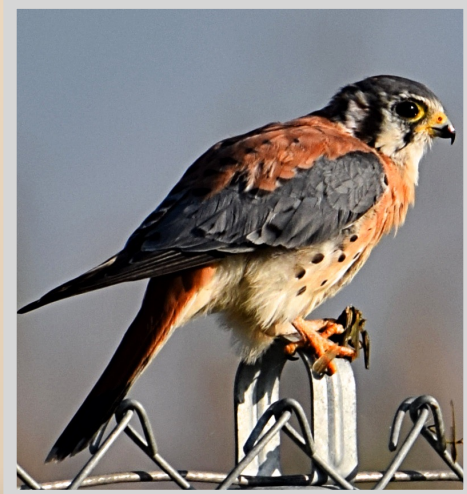
is perched, the bird constantly searches for prey while intermittently bobbing the head and tail. I am always amazed at the speed, persistence, and agility of this small, watchful falcon!

Have you ever heard the phrase, “eyes on the back of your head”? Well, this falcon *has* “eyes on the back of the head”. There are two large black feather patches called ocelli. Several falcons, hawks and owls have these “eyes” on the nape of the neck and these patches are thought to deter predators. In addition to these “eye” markings, the kestrel is the only falcon to have **two** black “sideburns” separated by a white patch. Other falcon species will typically have just one “sideburn”. If you ever get a chance to observe a perched American kestrel, be sure to look for these unique feather features!

The American kestrel has many characteristics and I would like to share a few of my favorites.

First, the **visual acuity** of this falcon is truly amazing! A kestrel can see a 2 mm insect from nearly 60 feet away! This excellent vision allows for precision capture of mice and small birds. Additionally, kestrels are able to catch and consume dragonflies and other large insects in flight. Perhaps the phrase “fast food” came from this eating on the wing! The American kestrel is an excellent mouser and has been known to stockpile mice in grass clumps for several weeks. All of these are significant survival tools for success of a great hunter.

Second, male kestrels have a bright yellow-orange skin patch, also known as the cere, at the base of the bill. The color is produced from eating foods rich in carotenoids. Females will seek males with a bright orange cere during the breeding season. Carotenoid rich male selection has been shown to improve offspring survival because less parasitic blood infections occur in the nestlings.



And finally, American kestrels have many names. They were formerly called sparrowhawks. The thought was they hunted small birds like sparrows. However, we now know their diet can consist of mice, small birds, dragonflies, bats, small snakes, lizards, frogs, and grasshoppers. So, yet another name the kestrel has been given is grasshopperhawk. The name kestrel actually originates from the French word *crécerelle*, meaning rattle. Their call is a loud series of *klee-klee-klee-klee-klee* or *kilee-kilee-kilee-kilee-kilee*. So a final name given to the kestrel is killyhawk because of the call it makes. This is definitely the most colorful, striking, rattling, fierce hunting falcon!



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