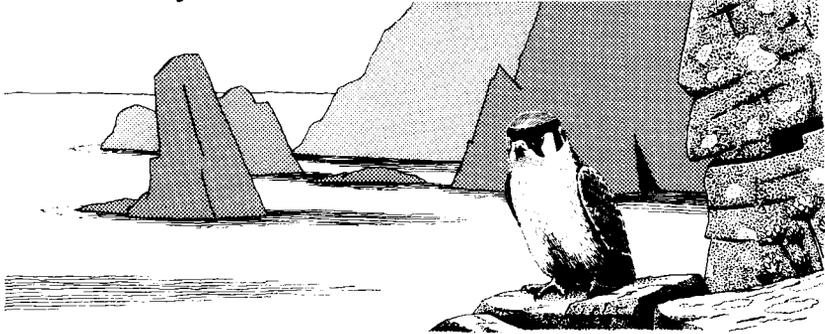


American Kestrel: new to Britain and Ireland

A. M. Taylor



Between 19th and 25th May 1976, wind conditions on Fair Isle, Shetland, were light and variable, mainly from the southeast, bringing a Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica* on 24th and Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*, Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*, Bluethroats *Luscinia svecica* and Red-

continued...

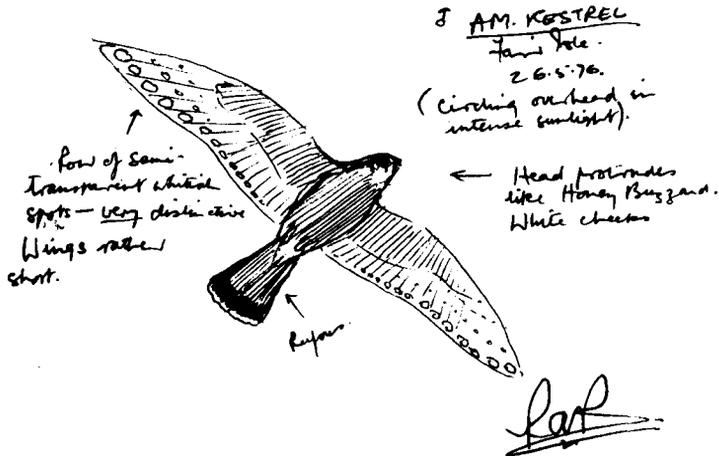


Fig. 1. Male American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*, Shetland, June 1976. 'Circling overhead in intense sunlight. Head protrudes like Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*. White cheeks. Row of semi-translucent whitish spots—very distinctive. Wings rather short. Rufous undertail.' (Field sketch in ballpoint by the late R. A. Richardson)

backed Shrikes *Lanius collurio* on 25th. Then, on the afternoon of 25th, several observers had brief views of a small falcon, similar to a Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, but 'not quite right'. Dark wings were mentioned in one case and reddish coloration in another. R. A. Broad and I discussed these reports and, bearing in mind the weather conditions and recent arrivals, thought they might refer to a Red-footed Falcon *F. vespertinus*—a species which neither of us had seen. So, in the evening, we set out to cover the general area where the sightings had occurred.

At about 18.30 GMT, in dull, overcast conditions, with a hint of drizzle, I noticed Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* at South Reeva giving alarm calls suggesting the presence of a predator. As I approached, I flushed a small falcon, but saw no plumage details. I noted where it landed on a cliff face and moved to a vantage point about 70m from it. It was perched upright, facing me, with only the head and upper half of the body visible. Using 8 × 40 binoculars, I could see a pinkish-buff breast, a slate-coloured leading edge to the wing and a very conspicuous head pattern: a dark cap with a rufous central patch and, below it, two dark vertical bars and a dark spot. After ten minutes, I decided to circle around the bird in the hope of seeing its back and tail. It took off, however, and flew round into Linni Geo. In the few seconds for which it was visible, it revealed its striking, contrasting coloration: the wings were dark blue-grey, while the rest of the upperparts were rich rufous-brown, with a dark sub-terminal band to the rufous tail. Its flight seemed agile and rather erratic, recalling that of a Merlin *F. columbarius*.

At this stage, I was puzzled about the bird's identity. I knew that I had seen illustrations of the head pattern, but could not place it. It had not occurred to me that it was a non-European species, so the only possibility seemed to be Red-footed Falcon. Nevertheless, I had doubts that it could be one, partly because I recalled that Red-footed Falcon looked long-winged,

while the bird I had been watching seemed comparatively small and compactly built, and because its head pattern was so distinctive.

I was then joined by RAB, J. N. Prescott and W. Tunnicliffe. We did not see the bird perched, but had brief views of its upperparts when we flushed it in Linni Geo and then in Steensi Geo, where it circled below us before flying off around the cliffs. JNP and WT saw it again in fading light in North Reeva.

On our return to the Observatory, I wrote full notes on what I had seen. I then consulted Witherby *et al.* (1940) and quickly ruled out Red-footed Falcon. Having established that it was not a European species, I looked in Peterson (1947) and immediately identified the bird as a male American Kestrel *F. sparverius*.

On the following two days, it was seen by a number of observers, mainly rather briefly or distantly, although on 26th RAB had good views of it perched on a fence post, feeding on a Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*; and later K. Bailey, Mrs P. Bailey, Miss S. Baldry, the late R. A. Richardson and I watched it soaring and gliding directly overhead in bright sunlight (see fig. 1). Notes from these sightings supplemented the initial observations and fully confirmed the identification. Throughout its stay, it remained in the area of the cultivated land in the south of the island. The following details were noted during its stay:

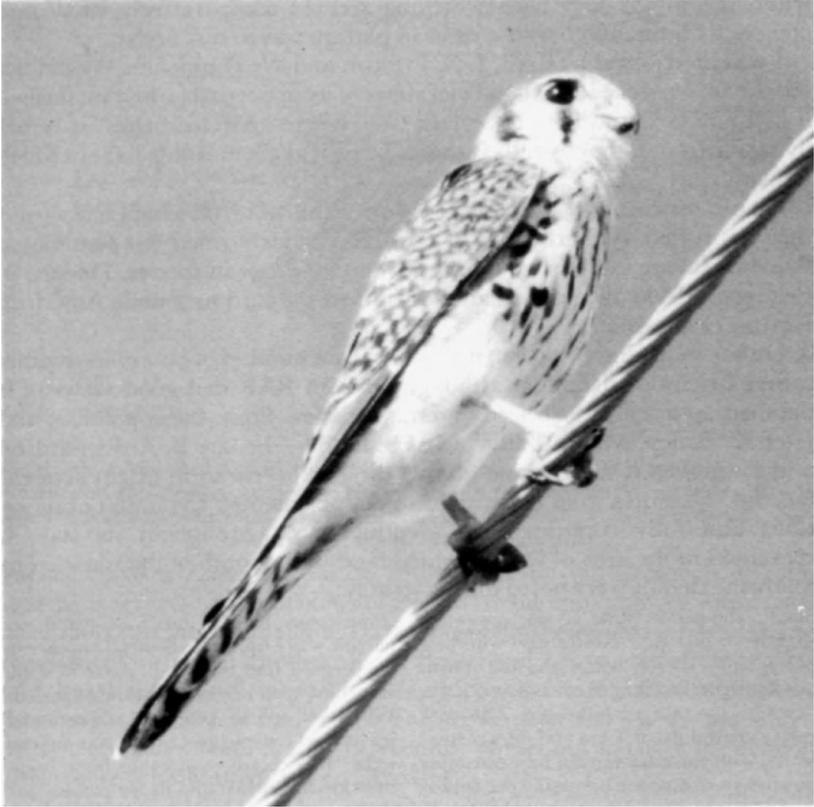
Small, compactly built falcon, appearing slightly smaller than Kestrel and with proportionately shorter wings and tail. Flight fast and agile, recalling Merlin. HEAD Crown, down to top of eye, dark slate, with dark rufous central patch. Chin and sides of head white, with two dark vertical bars extending down from crown, one below and one behind eye. Dark spot, surrounded by reddish buff, on side of nape. UPPERPARTS Rich rufous-brown, with narrow black barring on mantle and scapulars. Tail rich rufous-brown with

conspicuous black subterminal band and narrow white tip. WINGS General appearance on perched bird and from above in flight, slate-blue with blackish speckling and bars. When well spread, primaries and secondaries showed conspicuous white spots on inner webs, particularly noticeable from below. UNDERPARTS Breast and flanks pinkish buff. Belly pale, creamy or greyish. BARE PARTS Legs, feet and cere yellow, perhaps with orange tinge; iris dark.

This constitutes the first accepted record of American Kestrel for Britain and Ireland. It was followed closely by another at Bearah Tor, Cornwall, from 13th June 1976 (see page 227). One was present in the area of Dungeness, Kent, in 1966-67, but this individual was extremely tame and had clearly escaped from captivity. There are two previous European records, from Kalundborg, Denmark, in 1901 (Alexander & Fitter 1955) and Malta in October 1967 (Sultana *et al.* 1975); and also one in the Azores in February 1968 (Bannerman & Bannerman 1968).

Although the Fair Isle individual arrived when local weather conditions appeared unsuitable for a recent Atlantic crossing, Robert Hudson (*in litt.*) has pointed out that circumstances were in fact favourable. A front, followed by cloud and rain, moved out to sea over Newfoundland on 23rd May. The bird could have been caught up in this and then, over the next two days, carried in westerly airstreams, first on the northern fringes of an extensive high-pressure area centred over the Azores and later around the south of a depression between Scotland and Iceland.

The possibility of escape from captivity was considered. The bird showed



123. Female American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*, Antigua, January 1979 (Kenneth V. Cooper)

no signs of tameness, however, and when viewed from below in good light the tips of all flight feathers appeared to be in perfect condition. Between 1st July 1970 and 31st December 1976, only one American Kestrel was imported into Britain under licence and the only known captive individuals in Britain in 1976 were at Edinburgh Zoo (T. P. Inskipp *in litt.*).

Notes on the species

The American Kestrel breeds throughout North and South America, apart from northern Alaska and northern Canada. In North America, those breeding in the coldest areas are long-distance migrants, while southern populations are resident.

In all plumages, American Kestrels are identifiable by their distinctive head patterns. The male's plumage is as described above; two further details which were not noted in field descriptions of the Fair Isle bird are black spots on the breast and flanks, and black and white bars on the outer tail feathers, although there is considerable variation between individuals regarding the latter feature. The juvenile male is similar to the adult male, but has a barred tail with rufous tip, a duller crown patch and dark streaks on the breast. Females of all ages differ from adult males in having rufous

upperwing-coverts and secondaries. These, together with the uppertail-coverts and tail, are barred black. The breast, flanks and belly are streaked with brown and the pale spots on the primaries are rufous, not white (Cramp & Simmons 1980).

The species is very similar to the Kestrel in behaviour and choice of habitat. It hovers, or perches on trees, poles, wires and so on, to hunt for large insects and small birds, mammals, lizards and amphibians. Throughout its range, it is common on edges of woodland and in all types of open country. Like the Kestrel, it has been quick to exploit urban environments (Brown & Amadon 1968; Peterson 1947).

Acknowledgments

I am most grateful to Roger Broad and the Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust for the opportunity to work at the observatory for the 1976 season, and to Roger Broad for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Summary

A male American Kestrel *Falco sparverius* seen on Fair Isle, Shetland, from 25th to 27th May 1976 has been accepted as the first record for Britain and Ireland.

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