



Arizona's Raptor Experience, LLC

March 2017

~Newsletter~

Greetings from Chino Valley!

We hope this newsletter finds you well and enjoying the beginning of spring.

We'd like to thank Watters Garden Center for inviting us back this year! We had a wonderful time seeing some old friends and some new faces.

This month's newsletter highlights the American Kestrel. Hope you enjoy it!

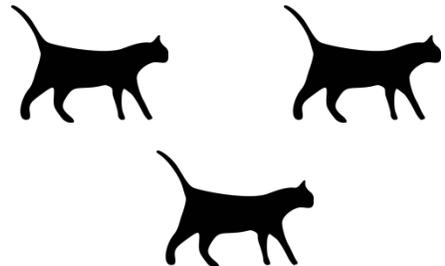
*Happy
Spring!*



A gentle reminder for our bird (and cat) loving friends...

Springtime means warm days, blooming flowers and nesting birds. Remember, the mere presence of a roaming cat in the neighborhood can cause songbirds to leave their nesting area. Also, fledging baby birds are easy targets for hunting cats.

Protect the birds and love your cat by keeping it indoors – safe from cars, predators and disease.



Welcome Charlie!



At the end of January Paul and I attended the AZ Falconers Association *Desert Hawking Meet* in Wickenburg, where we became acquainted with Charlie, a male American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*). Our new friend Jan (also a falconer), who will be travelling for the next year, asked if we would care for Charlie in her absence. We happily agreed and are thrilled to have Charlie as an ambassador for the kestrel nest box project we are working on with AZ Game and Fish. Kestrels, once known as Sparrow Hawks, are cavity nesting birds that benefit from the placement of man-made nest boxes. Our goal is to place 50 boxes in Arizona this year (22 done so far!).

American Kestrels are obligate secondary cavity nesters, meaning they only nest in cavities and they do not make the cavities

themselves. The size of kestrel populations is closely tied to the availability of nesting cavities in parts of their breeding range. Other habitat requirements include open areas with short ground vegetation and shrubs, fences, powerlines or other perching sites.

American Kestrels are sit-and-wait predators, utilizing those perching sites as they wait for unsuspecting prey to become visible. Their most common food sources are large insects, small mammals and small birds. When few perches are available or updrafts occur, kestrels can be seen hover hunting, which makes them visible and vulnerable to larger hawks like Cooper's Hawks (*Accipiter cooperii*) that will readily kill and consume them.



Photo by Eric Gofreed, DVM

Together with predation by larger hawks, loss of habitat and use of biocides (pesticides & rodenticides that kill their prey) has led to a decrease in American Kestrel populations by as much as 60% in parts of their range. Visit www.peregrinefund.org/projects.american-kestrel to learn more about efforts to conserve this species.

Characteristics of the American Kestrel



Malar stripe – like other falcons, the kestrel has a distinct stripe on its cheek, known as a malar stripe. Malar refers to the cheekbone.



Ocelli – another term for eyespot. On the back of a kestrel's head there are a pair of ocelli which are thought to help prevent predation from behind.



Kestrels are sexually dichromatic – the male has blue-gray wings and rufous tail feathers with a single broad subterminal black band.



The wings and tail feathers of the female are rufous with black bars across their lengths.

P. Schnell photo, circa 1985

The bird living next door...



About 30 minutes before darkness falls, a Western Screech Owl (*Megascops kennicottii*) surveys the yard as it prepares to leave its daytime roosting site, in this case a man-made nesting box, to begin its nightly search for prey. Our neighbors Pat and Tom are

lucky to have attracted this visitor to their yard, although it isn't that big a surprise considering their yard offers all that wildlife species need: cover, food, water and space. The nesting box is a readily used substitute for a natural tree cavity – Western Screech owls are secondary cavity nesters – and the daily ration of bird seed on the ground attracts nighttime visitors like this Kangaroo rat (*Dipodomys sp.*), which is a hearty meal for the owl, weighing in at 44g.



Owls benefit their human neighbors by reducing populations of pests such as rodents and large insects. This natural form of pest control is superior to the use of rodenticides, which often kill non-target species like the owls and hawks which readily consume the poisoned dead or dying rodents. Although rodents make up a fair portion of the owl's diet, they will also take small birds, bats, etc.



We learn about the habits of birds in a variety of ways, including temporarily capturing and banding the bird with an aluminum band bearing a 9-digit number specific to that bird. This number allows individuals to be identified in the future. Having an owl using a nesting box is an ideal situation for researchers. The birds are easily caught, banded, measured (weight, wing chord) and returned unharmed to the nesting box in just minutes. (Of course it is necessary to have a banding permit from both the Bird Banding Lab at the federal level and also from the state of AZ.)

Banding birds (also called ringing) is a very old practice used to identify individuals and track them along migration routes, to nesting areas, to study their habits and to learn just how long each species can live. The first record of a metal band being attached to a bird's leg was in 1595 in Europe. Paul and I banded this owl as part of a nest box project we are actually doing with American Kestrels. Although many types of data are collected for this project, an important one does include the use of the box by a non-target species.

This little owl is a welcome visitor to our neighbor's yard, and will likely continue to use the box as a roosting site and possibly a nesting site as well. In any case, we hope to find others in nesting boxes in our area!



Guest photo:



Male American Kestrel

Falco sparverius

Photo by: Eric Gofreed, DVM