

Eurasian Kestrel in Florida: First record for the southeastern United States, with a review of its status in North America

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ABSTRACT

This article documents the occurrence and identification of a female-plumaged Eurasian Kestrel at Lake Apopka North Shore Restoration Area, Orange County, Florida 26 February through 22 March 2003. The kestrel furnished a first for the state and for the southeastern United States. The status and distribution of the species elsewhere in the New World is also discussed.

FIELD ENCOUNTER

On 26 February 2003, Robinson discovered a female-plumaged Eurasian Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) at Lake Apopka North Shore Restoration Area, northwest of Orlando in Orange County, Florida. The kestrel remained at the site through 22 March and was documented by photographs and videotapes. The following description is based on field notes written by Kwater and Pranty during and immediately after viewing the bird (at times within 100 m) for more than two hours (0830–1030, 1130–1135 EST) on 1 March 2003. We also examined disgorged

photographs taken by Weatherman (e.g., Figure 1) on 5 and 14 March. In direct comparison, the Eurasian Kestrel was noticeably (20–30%) larger than the male American Kestrel (*F. sparverius*) with which it often associated. The Eurasian Kestrel appeared approximately intermediate in size between a Merlin (*F. columbarius*) and a Peregrine Falcon (*F. peregrinus*), although neither of these species was available for direct comparison. The plumage was rusty-brown above with black barring on the upperparts (Figure 1). The forehead was grayish-white, finely streaked with black. The crown was browner and also was finely streaked with black. Each side of the face had a single bold blackish stripe that extended downward from the eye and curved slightly toward the nape. The cere was yellow, the upper mandible was dark gray with a black tip, and the lower mandible was gray with a yellow base. The tail was rusty-brown, narrowly barred black, with a much wider black subterminal band and a narrow whitish tip (Figure 1). The underparts were whitish-buff, heavily streaked with dark brown. The legs and feet were bright yellow, and the claws were black.

In flight, the Eurasian Kestrel showed blackish outer primary tips and whitish wing coverts spotted with black. The upper surface of the primaries was dark brown and contrasted sharply with the rusty coverts. The undersides of the flight feathers were lightly barred. At rest, the flight feathers showed narrow pale fringes, and the folded primary tips did not reach the subterminal tail band (Figure 1). This short primary projection, together with the black claws, distinguish the Eurasian Kestrel from the longer-winged, pale-clawed Lesser Kestrel (*Falco naumanni*; Porter et al. 1981, Flood 2002), which has not been reported in North America (A.O.U. 1998). Plumage patterns such as the barred crown and tail ruled out an adult male Eurasian Kestrel, but the separation in the field of adult females, juvenile females, and juvenile males is difficult (Cramp et al. 1980, Porter et al. 1981, Wheeler and Clark 1995).

The kestrel frequented the southeastern portion of Lake Apopka North Shore Restoration Area. It foraged during early morning and late afternoon in fields recently plowed for weed control, and spent mid-day roosting on favored perches in a shrubby field closer to Lake Apopka. The flight was direct, with deep wingbeats. Most of us never saw the kestrel hover, but Weatherman observed hovering on one or two occasions. When hunting, the kestrel generally perched on low stubble in the fields, and

made short, low, foraging flights to the ground. Most of these flights appeared to be successful forays for invertebrates and perhaps other small prey. The kestrel displayed no jesses, bands, or other signs of having escaped from captivity.

DISPOSITION OF RECORD

According to the database of the International Species Information System in October 2003 (ISIS 2003), only one Eurasian Kestrel was held captive in a registered facility in the Western Hemisphere during the time of our sighting—a female at Zoo Atlanta, Atlanta, Georgia. The bird curator of Zoo Atlanta confirmed the continued presence of their Eurasian Kestrel at that facility (J. Ballance, pers. comm.). The Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee accepted our report (FOSRC 03-512) as the first verifiable record of the Eurasian Kestrel in Florida (R. Bowman, pers. comm.). This record was preceded by an undocumented report of a female at Cape Canaveral, Brevard County, on 1 January 1995 (Pranty 1995).

DISCUSSION

The Eurasian Kestrel is a casual vagrant to North America (A.O.U. 1998), with a fairly well-defined pattern of occurrence (Table 1). There are 11 reports from the western Aleutian Islands and the Bering Sea region of Alaska, four in spring (May–June) and seven in fall (September–October). Seven other reports have occurred outside of Alaska: singles from interior British Columbia and along the Washington coast (October–December), four from the Atlantic coast (New Brunswick to New Jersey; September and January–May), and the interior Florida individual (February–March). The Florida record falls within these temporal patterns of distribution but is considerably farther south (by 1300 km) than the southernmost prior United States observation. It also furnishes only the second inland occurrence in the New World; Lake Apopka is 93 km from the Atlantic Ocean.

There are few other reports of the species from elsewhere in the New World or its margins. In the Caribbean Basin, the only records of the species are of a first-winter female at Carli Bay, Trinidad from 17 December 2003 through 1 January 2004 (M. Kenefick; ph. C. Hull et al.), and an emaciated bird from the west coast of Martinique in 1959. There is a report from Bermuda at Ferry Point 4 February 1968 (D. B. Wingate, pers. comm.), and there is mention of a report from French Guiana (A.O.U. 1998). The database of the journal *Sea*

Swallow contains at least 171 reports of Eurasian Kestrels coming aboard ships in the Atlantic through 2003. An additional record of this kind from off Kap Farvel, Greenland dates from late September or early October 1820 (Sabine 1823). We cannot rule out the possibility of ship assistance in the case of the Florida kestrel or indeed most other Atlantic coast records.

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Figure 1. Female-plumaged Eurasian Kestrel at Lake Apopka North Shore Restoration Area, Orange County, Florida 14 March 2003. The single facial stripe rules out American Kestrel, the barred upperparts rule out Merlin, and the dark claws (visible in other photographs) and shorter primary extension rule out Lesser Kestrel. This individual represents the first record of the Eurasian Kestrel in the southeastern United States, and perhaps only the tenth verifiably documented record in North America. Digiscoped photograph by Harold Weatherman.

Table 1. Verifiable records (documented by specimen or photographic evidence) and reports of the Eurasian Kestrel in North America, arranged chronologically within each state or province. All observations refer to single individuals. Non-specimen designations of females may be better considered as birds in female plumage, because juvenile males and females are difficult to distinguish in the field from adult females. Specimens are archived at the British Columbia Provincial Museum (BCPM) and University of Alaska Museum (UAM).

| Location | Date(s) | Documentation / Plumage | References |
|---|--|--|---|
| Alaska, Shemya Island | 5–9 Sep 1978 | specimen; juvenile female (UAM 3683) | Gibson (1981), Gibson and Kessel (1992) |
| Alaska, Shemya Island | 2–6 Oct 1978 | report; female | Gibson (1981), Gibson and Kessel (1992) |
| Alaska, Attu Island | 4–7 May 1981 | report; male | Gibson and Kessel (1992) |
| Alaska, Navarin Basin, 175 km wsw. of St. Matthew Island | 12–14 Sep 1983 | photograph; female | Gibson and Kessel (1992) |
| Alaska, Attu Island | 17 Oct 1983 | report; female | Gibson and Kessel (1992) |
| Alaska, Attu Island | 3–4 Jun 1984 | report; male | Gibson and Kessel (1992) |
| Alaska, w. Bering Sea (57° 11' N 165° 40' W) | 4–7 Oct 1991 | photograph; female | Gibson and Kessel (1992) |
| Alaska, Buldir | May 1992 | report; female | Gibson and Byrd (unpubl. data) |
| Alaska, Attu | 22 May 1997 | report; female | Tobish (1997) |
| Alaska, Little Diomedes Island | salvaged in spring 1998; presumably died in fall 1997 | specimen; adult female (UAM 8398) | Gibson and Byrd (unpubl. data) |
| Alaska, Shemya | 17–18 Oct 2001 | report; female-plumaged | Tobish (2002), D. Gibson (<i>in litt.</i>) |
| British Columbia, Alkali Lake | 10 Dec 1946 | specimen; female (BCPM 15934) | Campbell (1985), AOU (1998), ABA (2002) |
| Washington, Bow | 31 Oct–11 Nov 1999 | photographs; juvenile, "probably male" | Mlodinow and Tweit (2000), S. Mlodinow, <i>in litt.</i> |
| New Brunswick, Fort Beausejour | (late Dec 1987?) 18 Jan–mid-Mar 1988 | report; female | Mactavish (1988), Nikula (1988), A.O.U. (1998) |
| Nova Scotia, Minudie | | | |
| Massachusetts, Nastasket Beach | 29 Sep 1887 ¹ | specimen; female | Cory (1888), A.O.U. (1998) |
| Massachusetts, Cape Cod | 14 Apr–5 May 2002 | photographs; adult male | Perkins (2002) |
| New Jersey, Cape May Point | 23 Sep 1972 | photographs; juvenile female | Clark (1974), AOU (1998) |
| Florida, Lake Apopka | 26 Feb–22 Mar 2003 | photographs; female-plumaged | this paper |

¹A.B.A. (2002) incorrectly lists this date as 23 Sep 1887.