



Utah County Birders Newsletter

February 2025

CONTENTS:

- [Monthly Meeting, Announcements](#)
 - [Upcoming Field Trips](#)
 - [President's Message](#)
 - [Bird of the Month](#)
 - [Field Trip Reports](#)
 - [Art Gallery](#)
 - [Backyard Birds](#)
-

FEBRUARY MEETING

Thursday, February 13th, 2025 7pm Bean Museum and on Zoom

We have a special guest speaker this month, Terry Rich, joining us all the way from Idaho.

His presentation is titled: **Identifying Birds by Song: Song Basics**

Bird species have unique song types that allow you to identify them almost immediately once you learn how. Some species' songs are innate, and some are learned. Learned songs tend to be more complex. We'll look at the basics of bird song and the most recent terminology on how to describe them. We'll also be listening to songs and looking at tools that can help you visualize and learn them.

About our speaker: Terry has a BS in Wildlife Ecology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and an MS in Zoology from Idaho State University. Terry worked for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management for 20 years and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for 15 years. He currently writes a weekly column on birds for the Idaho Press, teaches numerous classes, and leads birding field trips. Terry is an Honorary Life-time Member of the American Ornithological Society. He and his wife, three kids, and seven grandkids all live in the Boise, Idaho area.

(The zoom link will go out in an email the day before the meeting.)

UPCOMING FIELD TRIPS

SATURDAY FEB 22, Lee Kay Ponds, Saltair, Great Salt Lake State Park

We will see what kind of ducks, gulls, shorebirds, and other birds we can find between Lee Kay Ponds, Saltair, and Great Salt Lake State Park. Meet at the Pioneer Crossing Park and Ride located at 60 N. 900 West in American Fork at 7:30 AM on Saturday February 22nd. Look forward to seeing as many of you as possible.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Thank you to all who worked to make our January Challenge Award dinner and meeting a success, and to all of you who came to join in the fun. It takes a lot of planning and work to make this occasion happen. KC Childs will be handling the field trips this year so we are hoping that some of you can step up 'to the plate' and help with the field trips. Field trips are an important part of any birding group.

Since this year is an odd numbered year, create your own personal challenge. At the January meeting, I suggested that you could look at the challenge of 100 species in each of the 29 counties in Utah. Yes, some of the counties are harder than others. The easiest counties are, of course, the ones that we bird more frequently. Take a serious, hard look at your bird lists or life list, pick a county that you do not have 100 species and pick that county as a goal. Perhaps you have a county that only needs perhaps 20 more species or less. Tell KC about birding a county that isn't that far away that would put you over the top on a "100 species" goal.

It will soon be warming up. I promise!! So, think about your own personal challenge and go for it!

Happy birding!
Yvonne

BIRD OF THE MONTH

American Kestrel

Falco sparverius

Article, photo and art credits: Jeremy Telford



It drops from its power line perch, gliding over the top of the grass, the hot afternoon sun slightly abated by a stiff breeze. Catching the incoming wind, it shoots up and hovers over the field. Small wings flap and its tail spreads. The head remains almost motionless as the body moves in a hundred tiny ways keeping it in place. At sixty miles an hour it dives hitting the mouse and hopping roughly on the ground to catch its balance. With a spread of its wings it shoots back into the air, the mouse firmly gripped in its talons, to perch on the top of a power pole. It devours the rodent. Hooked beak shreds the flesh into bite size pieces while the feet and talons firmly grip its prey. The parts it can't digest collect in its crop. The neck above the chest puffs out as it fills with fur and bone later to be regurgitated as a pellet. It tips back its head, pulling the last bit of meat into its mouth. Its hunger only momentarily satiated it returns to the power line, its tail gently bobbing as its eyes search the field already looking for its next meal.

The American Kestrel is North America's smallest falcon. A small American Kestrel can weigh as little as 34 pennies (3-6 ounces). Falcons in general are small raptors built for incredible speed and maneuverability. Its larger cousin, the Peregrine Falcon, is the world's fastest animal diving at speeds up to 200 miles per hour. Though not nearly as fast, the American Kestrel has a few unique abilities of its own.

Though other raptors, like the Northern Harrier, can hover, few do it as well as the American Kestrel. By using a technique called wind hovering, Kestrels fly into the wind at the same speed it is blowing them back. It spreads its tail and rapidly flaps its wings to create the necessary lift to keep it aloft. It also has finger-like projections from the wrist of the wing that when extended create even more lift and it has evolved to have stiffer than normal primary feathers that it can bend into the wind pushing it up even further.

If you watch closely the hovering body bounces back and forth as the wings flap and change shape, but the head is almost motionless as it looks down on the field below. This head stabilization is critical for kestrels, who again like most raptors, have limited ability to move their eyes in their sockets. Using a complex combination of muscles and vertebrae in its head and neck the kestrel is able to maintain a steady line of sight on its prey even in significant wind.

Like most raptors, Kestrels have amazing vision. They can see prey from up to 50m away. This is about the width (not length) of a football field. Their eyes are essentially nature's own version of bifocals. On the back of their eyes they have what is called fovea, this is the part of the eye where visual acuity is highest. Unlike most animals, many raptors have two foveae, a deep fovea in the center of the eye which allows them to see long distances with sharp clarity, and a shallow fovea surrounding it which lets them view things closer up. This is why some raptors bob their heads up and down while staring at you. You may be standing just between the optimal viewing ability of each of these foveae and the bird is trying to get a clear look.

As it looks down on the field the kestrel is searching for paths left by the rodents. Not paths of broken grass or sticks but of glowing urine. The kestrel is able to see on the ultraviolet spectrum. Rodents like voles and mice that make up much of the Kestrel's diet during the spring months have urine that reflects ultraviolet light. They often use this urine to mark their territories, and it is deposited along the trails they frequently travel. By searching out the brightest trails marked with the heaviest deposits of urine the kestrel dramatically increases its chances of finding its next meal, or the next meal for its chicks.

During courtship the male American Kestrel often brings its mate gifts of lizards or dead mice with their heads removed. While normally solitary these mating birds will spend the breeding season together courting and raising young.

American Kestrels are cavity nesters. Traditionally they would nest in holes in trees along the edges of fields, or in similar holes found in cacti or in cliffs. With their population declining, especially in the Eastern US, a dedicated effort to put up nest boxes next to appropriate habitat has helped the birds significantly.

The female Kestrel, once the pair has agreed on a suitable nest sight, will typically lay four to six eggs. The last egg is often lighter in color than the rest. Scientists believe this is because the female bird has put all she has into the laying of her clutch. Both male and female birds will take turns incubating the eggs while the other hunts. They must stay in top physical condition. When those chicks hatch, they are ravenous.

Nestlings can eat two to three times that of their parents. That's two to three mice a day. Considering that in a successful brood there can be up to six young and that parents themselves need to eat that can be a couple of dozen mice a day for one family. If food is not plentiful the youngest chick often does not survive as the older and stronger chicks are better able to claim what little food there is.

American Kestrels do eat more than rodents. During the summer months after the nestlings have fledged, their diet often turns to insects like grasshoppers and dragonflies. They will also eat small reptiles like lizards and snakes. While most hunting takes the raptor plunging to the ground in a dive called a stoop, they will sometimes catch insects or even other birds on the wing. Unlike many raptors, usually hawks and eagles, Kestrels tend not to eat carrion. They will eat it if they themselves caught the prey and cached it for later consumption.

The fledging of the chicks typically happens about 30 days after hatching. Kestrels are sexually dimorphic. This means that the male and female of the species look different from each other. Males have a light cobalt blue along the primaries of their wings, while the female of the species has a warm rust color. Unlike most birds this dimorphism can be seen in immature birds even before they have fledged. Fledged young don't immediately leave the nesting area. They often can be seen hanging around for two to three weeks after, still highly dependent on their parents for food.

Both sexes do share some plumage in common. Both have dark eye spots on the back of their neck. Because the American Kestrel is such a small falcon it can be preyed upon by larger birds. Having these fake eyes can help confuse other birds into believing that it sees them or would see them if they dove to attack. Another small raptor that has evolved similar eye spots is the Northern Pygmy Owl.

Kestrels are often identified by the two malar stripes, or mustaches, on the front of the head. Because the Kestrel is diurnal, or hunts during the day, these stripes help much in the same way as the black paint under a footballer's eyes. The black helps to absorb sunlight and keep the glare from hindering a successful hunt.

American Kestrels are partial migrants. Many stay in one area year round. Others, like those that breed in Northern Canada will travel as far as South America during the winter. Some Kestrels also follow migrating insects such as dragonflies and butterflies.

Next time you visit the fields in search of Bobolinks or Sandhill Cranes, take a minute to look at the relatively common American Kestrel. Watch its head and wings as it hovers and remember all the incredible evolution that came together to make North America's smallest falcon.



References:

Hawk Mountain Sanctuary: Global Raptor Conservation

<https://www.hawkmountain.org/raptors/american-kestrel>

The Peregrine Fund

<https://peregrinefund.org/explore-raptors-species/falcons/american-kestrel>

The Company of Biologists: Journal of Experimental Biology

<https://journals.biologists.com/jeb/article/227/15/jeb247305/361474/Steady-as-they-hover-kinematics-of-kestrel-wing>

Migratory Bird Day: American Kestrel | Carolina Raptor Center

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6tsbQXlxNY#:~:text=Meet%20McKenna%20and%20one%20of%20our%20adorable,Nest%20Box%20Study%20%2D%20Full%20length%20documentary.>

A Wilder View: A look at the American Kestrel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8G-zU3AY8Y#:~:text=The%20American%20Kestrel%20is%20the%20continent's%20most,Reconstructions%E2%80%A2356K%20views%20%C2%B7%2016:29%20%C2%B7%20Go%20to>

[\[See past Bird of the Month articles\]](#)

FIELD TRIP REPORTS

Utah Lake-Gulls

Lindon Boat Harbor, Utah Lake State Park, East Bay

January 18, 2025

Article by KC Childs

It was a bit of a chaotic field trip with the weather that hit right at start time. A good group of birders started off at Lindon Boat Harbor to see what was out and about. 10 birders braved the cold and snowy conditions to try and see what kind of gulls we could find. We briefly looked at Lindon Boat Harbor and unfortunately the ice had mostly melted off of Utah Lake and made it so gulls weren't concentrated. However, we were able to see a big group of **Ring-billed** and **California Gulls**.

We then went and tried our luck at Clegg's Pond to see what was lurking around. We were greeted with a flock of **Bushtits**, which was a nice surprise. There was a good group of waterfowl on the pond including **Ring-necked Ducks**, **Redhead**, **Ruddy Duck**, **Northern Shoveler**, **Gadwall**, **American Wigeon**, **Mallard**, and **Canada Geese**. There was also a small flock of **Ring-billed Gulls** around

We then headed to Utah Lake State Park where we were greeted with white-out conditions and a few Bald Eagles as we entered. The weather made it difficult to see much of anything. We did notice a few **Ring-billed Gulls** and **California Gulls**, but unfortunately the weather was such that we weren't able to see much and quickly dispersed from there.

Some of us continued over to Timpanogos Golf Club where we were able to see some more birds in the snow including the famous **Eurasian Wigeon** that Sam and Keeli spotted. We also got to see **Northern Pintail**, **American Wigeon**, **Green Winged Teal**, **Mallards**, **Northern Shovelers**, **Black-crowned Night Heron**, **Great Egret**, and a fly-by **Greater Yellowlegs**.

With the storm getting worse and the freeway shut down, a couple of people decided to run over to Flowserve to see if anything was out moving. We were happy to see some bird life in the snow. We saw some beautiful **Hooded Mergansers**, **Gadwall**, **American Wigeons**, **Canada Geese**, **Great Egret**, and two **Belted Kingfishers**. We also found more **Ring-billed Gulls**, but unfortunately, we couldn't find any other species of gulls.

The last of the group stopped on our way out at Footprinter Park to see the celebrity **Western Screech Owl** that likes to hang out there. It was sound asleep, and we were able to hopefully not disturb him too much. It is always a treat to get to see an owl.

I appreciate anyone that braved the weather for any part of the day, and hopefully February will bring better weather and more birds.



Eurasian Wigeon by Sam Phillips

~Art Gallery~

Jim Strong-Photography:



Northern Flicker family, Fish Lake.



Juvenile Great Horned Owl near Cedar Fort, Utah, on private property.

I had permission to be there.



Rufus Hummingbird and Friend, Antelope Island

Ross Bartholomew-Photography: Ivory Gull. This photo was taken in the pack ice north of Svalbard. Around 81° north (about 550 miles from the North Pole).



Back Yard Birds

Lynn Garner – Provo: We have had Wild Turkeys in our neighborhood for years, but this year they showed up in our yard.



KC Childs – Orem: I put up a Western Screech Owl box in my yard a bit ago and finally saw one using it!

Steve Van Winkle – Lehi: American Kestrel, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cedar Waxwing at Equestrian Field, Hunter Park in Lehi.

