

# A summer full of falcons

As local readers may be aware, Elaine Conners Center for Wildlife in Madison takes in injured and orphaned wild animals which find themselves in need of care. This can be as a result of a bird or animal being orphaned when the parents are killed or relocated, or the youngster itself may be injured. We provide rehabilitation and support care until the patients are ready to be released on their own.

Each summer we are apt to see one or two American Kestrel falcons admitted to our center and we have had one nest of kestrels come in from the same house in Littleton three times! In that instance, the parent falcons have built their nest in the same precarious location in the eaves of the home; as the youngsters grow they fall from the cavity nest onto the sidewalk below. In this case we recommended to the homeowner that they close off the area of siding to encourage the falcon parents to nest in a location which will be safer for their babies. Sometimes we may admit a single kestrel from separate locations on different dates which is opportune as they are best raised with another kestrel or a "foster." This past summer saw several falcons admitted.

The three falcons that we see in New Hampshire are usually the American kestrel, the merlin and, less frequently, the peregrine. The American Kestrel is a small bird, about 10 inches long with a wingspan to 8 inches. It has a high pitched "keely-keely" call and if you have several, the noise can be ear-splitting. The male is a beautifully marked and colorful bird with vertical black facial bars. The female is more muted in coloring. We once admitted a female kestrel from the drive-through at MacDonalds in North Conway where I can only assume she flew into a window or hit the building. We had another kestrel several years ago which came to us from the golf course in Jefferson after being struck by a wayward golf ball. Both falcons had head trauma and were able to be released. The merlin is a larger falcon, and can reach 12-13 inches long and is decorated with dark streaking. The merlin, possibly because of its slightly larger size, has the more notable and recognizable falcon shape, with sharply angled wings, designed for speed and control of air space. For a small hunter, the merlin is the Top Gun of avian flyers. The merlin will hunt birds but also takes small mammals where the kes-



Merlin falcon chick

treel feeds mainly on grasshoppers, insects and some mice and small birds. Peregrines can be up to 18 inches in length with a 15 inch wingspan. The peregrine is a truly beautiful bird and appears to wear a "helmet" on the head. This is the bird known as "Frightful" in "My Side of the Mountain" and is mentioned in Leviticus. The peregrine dominates the sky for airspeed and is the fastest bird or mammal in the animal kingdom.

Historically we take in more kestrels but this summer we took in equal merlins. The chick which confused us was the one walking down the middle of West Side Road in North Conway one mid-June evening. The bird was about the size of a tennis ball, nothing but white fluff with some dark markings.

Why this bird wasn't struck and killed is a miracle but from the several calls received, we know that several vehicles straddled it as it continued its journey down West Side. The area that the bird was picked up in is mostly open fields with few trees that were within walking distance by a 78 gram chick. Kestrels are usually cavity dwellers or can lay its eggs in buildings like the Littleton kestrel. But we were totally confused as to where this chick had come from. Because my first choice is always to return a chick (or any wild baby) to its parents, I spent days searching for signs of its nest with no success. At the time we admitted this chick, we had no other kestrel falcons and began to search for a "surrogate parent" which is an unreleaseable bird of that same species which can foster an orphan until the youngster can be released to survive suc-

cessfully. We have several "fosters" or "surrogates" at Elaine Conners Center for Wildlife including Hunter our Broad-winged hawk who has raised dozens of Broad-winged chicks over the years, actually fostering orphaned chicks from other centers and Laila, our Red-tailed hawk who raises injured and orphaned Red-tailed juveniles which come her way. For years we also had a foster White-tailed doe, Spirit, who raised over 25 of our fawns. But we do not have a kestrel foster. After calling around, we were able to place our single kestrel at the Center for Wildlife in Maine and our chick was fostered by their surrogate "Savannah" and was released last Saturday. She will migrate throughout the fall months southward to warmer climates although some kestrels have been known to winter in Manchester and Dover, where they can be seen on telephone wires over large fields as they search for prey.

The merlin seen here was admitted after being struck by a vehicle in Berlin. She was the second merlin admitted from Berlin this past summer. Because this bird was admitted as an older juvenile and not a chick, a surrogate wasn't as critical as in the case of the nestling kestrel. Surrogates are necessary for proper "imprinting" to take place in young birds. Some birds "imprint" visually, some by auditory means, some as early as in the egg but all within a short time of hatching. Birds that do not imprint properly on their parents, or fosters of their species, will not know how to find mates, hunt prey, locate suitable habitat, avoid predators or be successful in life when released.

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Kestrel falcon chick