

Kestrel

The kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) can be seen hovering at the roadside, but is less common than in the recent past



This small falcon is regularly seen above the verges of motorways and major roads.

It is distinguished from the slightly similar sparrowhawk by its pointed wings and its habit of hovering to hunt its prey. The male has a blue-grey head and tail with a prominent black terminal band. The back and inner part of the wings are chestnut with dark speckles, the underparts are creamy brown with darker spotty streaks. The female is more uniformly brown with dark banding and paler underside, the tail is grey with narrow, dark bands. Both have black primaries.

Length: 32-35cm; wingspan: 71-80cm

Status in UK

37,000 pairs, declining; AMBER listed; resident

Population trends

Like most birds of prey kestrel numbers were reduced by indiscriminate killing in the 1800s. In the early 20th century there was a general increase as persecution decreased.

But in the late 1950s they declined again especially in arable farming areas due to the effects of persistent agricultural chemicals. When these were withdrawn, numbers built up again until the late 1970s. Since then the population has declined by some 25 per cent, probably due to the intensification of agriculture reducing their small mammal prey.

Habitat and distribution

Kestrels favour open countryside, farmland, roadside verges, heathland and coastal slopes. They are also found in towns and villages. This small falcon is one of Britain's most widespread birds of prey, present throughout the UK, except for the islands of Harris and Lewis and the Shetlands.

Breeding

Kestrels do not make a nest but will use holes in trees and ledges on cliffs and buildings. They will take over old nests of other birds and readily use nestboxes.

Feeding

Small mammals, particularly voles, are the main prey, birds and insects, such as dung beetles, as well as earthworms are occasionally taken.