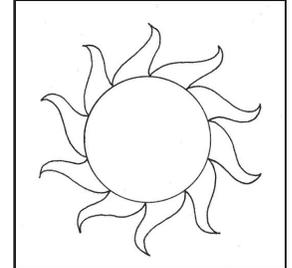
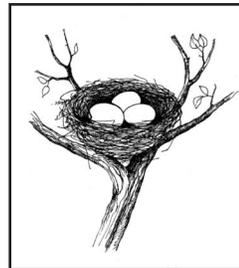
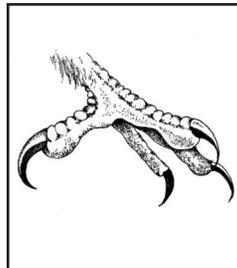
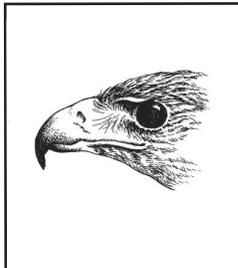
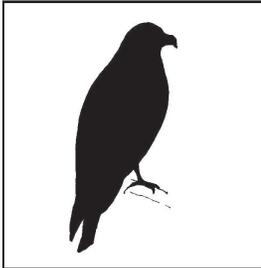


Falcons

Order Falconiformes
Family Falconidae



The peregrine, merlin and kestrel are all **Falcons** that are found in **Pennsylvania**. Falcons are broad-shouldered hawks with large heads, long pointed wings and long tails. This **body shape is perfect for high-speed flights**. They rarely soar, instead flying with fast, stroking wingbeats. Kestrels hunt from a perch, but peregrins and merlins are known for attacking other birds in mid-flight, often diving down on flying prey from above.



American Kestrel

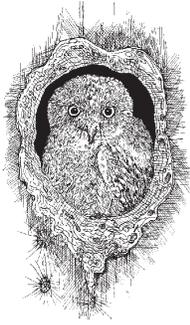
Falco sparverius



The **American Kestrel** is our **most common falcon**. Small and colorful, kestrels are often seen perched on fence posts or telephone wires carefully watching the ground for moving prey. **Also known as sparrow hawks**, these falcons are not much bigger than a robin.

Males and females show color dimorphism. Males and females both have reddish caps, backs and tails and black and white face patterns, but the male has slate-gray wings while the female has brown wings.

Kestrels are **very vocal birds** with a high-pitched *killy killy killy* call. Like kingfishers and rough-legged hawks, **kestrels can hover as long as there is a slight head-wind.**



Kestrels usually hunt from a perch, rather than catching their prey in mid-air like other falcons. In summer their diet is comprised mostly of insects, while rodents make up most of their winter feeding preferences.

Kestrels are cavity nesters using old woodpecker holes or natural rotted cavities. Kestrels also respond to man-made nesting boxes if they are placed in the proper location and at the proper heights -



Peregrine Falcon

Falco peregrinus



Peregrine Falcons are an endangered species in Pennsylvania. Mature birds are easily recognized by their black heads and black “tearstains” below the eye. Their upper bodies are slate-gray with white and dark barred undersides. Immature peregrins are brown-streaked.

They stand about 20 inches including their tail. Wingspans are almost four feet. **Peregrine falcons are the fastest of all birds.** They are powerful hunters that rely on the element of surprise when they attack. Folding their wings against their bodies, **peregrines are able to dives at speeds of up to 200 mph.** They strike their victim with such force that the strike alone often kills their prey. Once the victim falls to the ground the peregrine grabs it with its talons and carries it off to eat.

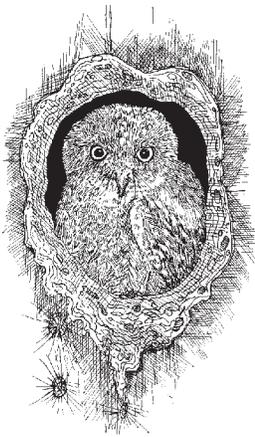
In the past, toxic pesticides nearly wiped out these birds until many of the pesticides were outlawed and the birds were placed on the federal Endangered Species List. For the past several decades their numbers have slowly increased. **Ledge nesters**, peregrine falcons now nest on skyscrapers and bridges in Harrisburg, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. In these congested cities, pigeons are a favorite meal.



Merlin

Falco columbarius

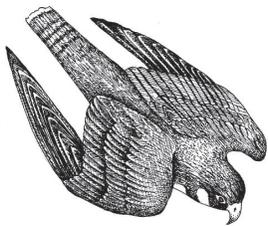




Merlins are about the size of a blue jay, but look very similar to peregrine falcons. They are also known as **pigeon hawks** – not because they eat pigeons but because they fly and perch like pigeons.

They prey on small birds, insects and small mammals, including bats.

Merlins nest in cavities, on ledges or abandoned crow nests. **They do not nest in our state** but they can be seen during spring and fall migrations.



A Simple Review of Falcons



Falcons are a group of raptors (birds of prey) built for swift flight and fast diving attacks on their prey – mostly other birds. They often have **two black facial stripes or “tear” marks** under their eyes. Their flight is often a series of rapid wing beats alternating with glides.

Our smallest falcon is the American Kestrel. They are also among our most colorful birds and **along with harriers, kestrels are the only birds of prey with the male and female showing different colors.** Even though they are falcons, kestrels feed mostly on insects in the warm months and small rodents in the winter. And kestrels prefer to hunt from a perch waiting for their prey to pass by, rather than attack their prey from the air.

Kestrels can hover, but like osprey and kingfishers, **there must be a slight head wind** in order for them to do so. They are also very vocal birds, calling out a loud, excited, "killy, killy, killy," in flight or from a perch.

Kestrels are cavity nesters. If you ever find a large tree cavity near an open meadow with bird droppings dried to the wall it is probably a kestrel cavity. The nestlings squirt their dropping against the inside wall of the cavity where it dries and stays off of the other nestlings.

The Peregrine Falcon is the fastest bird known to man. They have been clocked in dives of over 175 mph while pursuing their prey – mostly birds. When they dive for their food, they can pluck the bird right out of the air. Like the bald eagle, peregrine falcons **were on the endangered species list** for many years because of pesticide poisoning. Recently their populations have been slowly increasing. **Peregrines** love to feed on pigeons and **have taken to living in large cities** to take advantage of the large pigeon populations found there. When these birds live in cities they **nest on the tops of large buildings.** In wilder parts of their range they often nest on cliffs.