

The Porch Kestrel

an expository rough draft from Mr. Harrison

He swooped at me, then disappeared into the darkness before the dawn. The next day, he repeated this gesture, and I decided I had to learn more about him. An American Kestrel—also known on as a “Sparrow Hawk”—has decided the post holding up my front porch should serve as his perch for morning hunting. I’m still not sure if he swooped so close to my head because he thought I was prey (doubtful), or perhaps he thought I would frighten easily and not disturb his hunting ground again. Based on my research so far, I don’t know if I’ll have an answer to his swooping, but I have learned numerous other facts that I will share with you in this report.

First and foremost, this Kestrel is simply a beautiful little raptor. His blue-gray wings, his dotted rufous-colored back, and his dotted, lighter-red breast are fantastic to look at when he’s not being shy and flying away at my approach. He’s somewhere between seven and eight inches tall, and impressively those little wings—when outspread—are almost three times longer than his height from head to toe. Most impressive to look at is his little head, which is also white with a blue-gray topping that looks like his “head of hair.” Two vertical black streaks drip down from his shiny, alert eyes. Just beyond



his real eyes are two very large circles that many believe are there to look like larger, always-open eyes. Why? Perhaps these false “eyes,” being so big, fool larger raptors from thinking this bird is a small, easy meal.

And that leads me to two facts I am always interested to learn about animals that fascinate me: 1) What eats the American Kestrel and 2) What is eaten by him? Interesting enough, there is not a lot of information on what other animals include the Kestrel in their diet. One article I found online said that perhaps larger hawks would eat this bird, but this isn’t common; only 2.8% percent in the study cited died by being hunted by other birds. Perhaps those false “eyes” of his really do work, and the only thing that definitively eats a kestrel is bacteria after they die of natural causes or in accidents

with human interference. Comparably to other raptors, their lifespan is pretty short; the average Kestrel lives on 15 months. In that time, they eat plenty of delicious pests—grasshoppers, mice, and voles—as well as some more helpful insects, like dragonflies, and helpful reptiles, like lizards. They will also occasionally eat smaller birds, like the sparrow, which is why the Kestrel is called a “Sparrow Hawk” by many.

This bird that swooped at me on my porch in the early hours is actually a falcon—the smallest member of the falcon family, in fact. Like other falcons, the Kestrel can be trained to hunt and return to the gloved arm of the person who trained it. With such a short life expectancy, I’m not sure if it would be worth it to spend the time training a Kestrel in the ways of falconry, but all reports I read say that it learns to hunt in this trained manner very quickly. When hunting, he either hovers in the air, searching for prey that he can dive bomb, or he studies movements on the ground from a perch—like the post on my front porch. This past spring, we had a large family of destructive voles move into the rock wall in my backyard. I can only hope he is studying those mouse-like pests from where he’s perched in the early hours of the morning. I would sure like to be rid of my vole problem before this bird’s fifteen months are up.

I find it sad when I meet someone who doesn’t think birds are very interesting animals to watch or learn about. I know a few people who are total bird enthusiasts, and that’s okay for them, but not really for me. I do believe, however, that if a creature—like this beautiful Kestrel—“sets up shop” in your yard, you should take the time to learn what he’s doing and what you can do to help him help you. If he wants to swoop at me, I’ll let him; just as long as he promises to devour some of those voles that nibble on my flowers and vegetables. Mr. Kestrel, you can stay on my porch anytime you like!