

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

The Kestrel is our most familiar farmland bird of prey. It is a small falcon which can often be seen hovering over areas of rough grassland, or perching on a post or bush. Using its keen eyesight it uses these elevated vantage points to search out its main prey of small mammals, insects and earthworms. During the breeding season it will also feed on starlings and other small birds. The sexes are similar in appearance having rich-brown upperparts although the male has a distinctive grey head and often a grey tail, whilst the female is brown all over and is slightly larger in size.

Habitat needs

The Kestrel requires areas of prey-rich habitat, usually rough un-grazed or lightly-grazed grassland which exhibits a tussocky structure. This habitat supports good numbers of insects such as beetles, as well as voles and other small mammals. In this respect the Kestrel has similar habitat requirements to that of the Barn Owl. Unlike the Barn Owl, it will often feed on starlings and other small birds during the breeding season. It uses its keen eyesight to catch its prey and although young kestrels will travel long distances sometimes to other parts of Europe, adult pairs are more sedentary occupying a home range in the breeding season, of about 2km² -5 km².



Nesting needs

The Kestrel will nest on ledges on buildings, cliffs or on the old open stick nests of birds such as Carrion Crow. Today, purpose-made nestboxes usually erected on isolated trees or on poles, some of which are specifically designed to accommodate both Kestrels and Barn Owls, now account for a significant proportion of Kestrel breeding sites in Britain. This species does not construct a nest, and three to six eggs are usually laid during April/May on a bed of old substrate or shredded pellets.

Most of the eggs hatch on the same day although the last egg often hatches two days later, each chick taking about 35 days to fledge. Kestrels, will often share Barn Owl nestboxes and it is not uncommon to find both species breeding in different compartments of the same nestbox at the same time, without major conflict, except for the occasional piracy of each others prey. Like Barn Owls they will commonly share with Jackdaws and Stock Doves.

Factors affecting the population in Britain

The decrease in the Kestrel population is little understood but may be associated with the decline in Starling abundance, or the rapid increase in the numbers and distribution of Buzzards in Britain during recent times. The use of agricultural pesticides, particularly DDT in the mid 1900's, and more latterly second generation anticoagulant rodenticides, which are known to accumulate in the body tissues of Kestrels through secondary poisoning, may also have affected the numbers of this species. In spite of the Kestrel's presence alongside roads, it does not succumb to the high incidence of road mortality suffered by Barn Owls, due to its common practice of hunting above the height of traffic.

Population status

Like many other farmland birds, the Kestrel is believed to have undergone a 20% decline in numbers during the last 10-20 years, especially in northern and western areas of Britain.



Legal protection

The Kestrel is protected under Section 1 of the WCA 1981 (as amended) which makes it an offence to intentionally kill, injure or take any wild bird or intentionally to destroy its nest, eggs or young.

Rough-grassland margins provided by the banks of watercourses are recognised as a vital habitat resource for Kestrels. Careful management of these linear grasslands coupled with the installation of nestboxes offer the opportunity of helping to restore the population of this declining bird in England and Wales.

The Association of Drainage Authorities
recognise that Internal Drainage Boards have a key role to play in helping to conserve the Kestrel in Britain.

The Association of Drainage Authorities

Species Action Plan for incorporation within Internal Drainage Board BAPs

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Conservation Status

In the UK Kestrel numbers have declined by about 30% between 1994 and 2007. The species is Amber Listed in Birds of Conservation on account of a moderate decline of between 25% and 40% over the last 25 years and because there is concern for this species throughout Europe.

The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 requires public bodies to fulfil their duties to conserve biodiversity, and biodiversity action plans (BAPs) are designed to help achieve this.

The Kestrel currently features in a few LBABs in England and Wales and is included as a priority species in the national BAP of the Highways Agency and regional BAP of Anglian Water.



Conservation Action

Since 1990 a concerted conservation effort has been made by the Wildlife Conservation Partnership (WCP) to encourage riparian owners and managers to reduce their intensity of grassland management. However although quite dramatic changes have occurred in agricultural practice, supported by government agri-environment schemes, to reduce food surpluses and more latterly to achieve greater farmland biodiversity, unlike Barn Owls these have yet to have any effect in reversing a declining population trend in Kestrels.

Relevance to IDBs

Rough-grassland margins provided by the banks of watercourses provide prime habitat for Kestrels and significant numbers breed in the two-tier nestboxes which have been designed to attract both Kestrels and Barn Owls. As such the Association of Drainage Authorities recognises Internal Drainage Boards have a key role to play in helping to maintain and restore the population of Kestrels. This species has been identified as being able to benefit significantly from the future actions of the IDBs and as a result this bird has been identified as an important Biodiversity Action Plan species.



Successes past and present

It is recognised that conservation efforts by the WCP to improve the fortunes of the Kestrel (and Barn Owl) has been underway in association with two IDBs since the late 1980s, and more recently with a further ten IDBs. These programmes contribute an important part of a wider objective by WCP to conserve Kestrels at the local and national levels of planning and conservation. As part of this, an audit of Kestrel numbers and breeding success is provided annually by WCP to each of the contributing IDBs.

Kestrel - Species Action Plan

Aim

The aim of the Drainage Board SAP for the Kestrel is to enhance the species' present range and population by achieving a sustainable two-fold increase in its numbers by 2020 having regard of the short-term fluctuations in breeding productivity which can occur. This to be achieved alongside the Barn Owl Action Plan.

Target

- Create and manage a network of rough, tussocky grassland habitat corridors within the IDB district.
- Provide artificial nesting sites on these habitat corridors, having regard for existing breeding pairs.
- Disseminate the levels of success that are being achieved.
- Develop a knowledge of Kestrel distribution and abundance within the district.
- Mitigate the impact of any site development or maintenance works on Kestrels.
- Raise awareness of Board staff, managing agents and contractors about the significance of the Kestrel in the IDB district and their obligations for the conservation this 'Amber Listed' species for which there is wide concern in the UK.

Actions

- Adopt mowing practices which maintain a minimum sward height of 150 mm to all channel banks.
Cut alternate banks on a rotational basis every second or third year to maintain a rank tussocky sward to one bank.
- Instigate a rolling programme of two-tier pole and pump-mounted nestboxes at 2 km intervals on the network.
- Undertake annual monitoring of nestboxes to determine occupancy and breeding success.
- Identify existing and potential nesting and foraging habitat and include records in an environmental database.
- Undertake a desk-top and site assessment where Kestrel habitats might be threatened and implement conservation action.
- Instigate training for Board members, staff and contractors involved in the management of water channels.

Partners

- Wildlife Conservation Partnership.

Date

- Annually to 2020
- Annually to 2020
- Annually to 2020
- Annual audit.
- Annually
- 2011

Indicators

- Length and quality of improved habitat.
- Number of nestboxes installed.
- Annual audit of success.
- Inventory of breeding sites in district.
- Monitoring and recording the success of mitigation work.
- Training held and advisory publication produced.

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SAP SUMMARY: Kestrel - Targets, Actions and Indicators

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Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Action	Partners	Date	Indicators	Reporting
KE1.1	Create an unbroken network of rough, tussocky grassland habitat corridors within the IDB district.		Adopt mowing practices which maintain a minimum sward height of 150 mm to all channel banks.				
KE1.2			Cut alternate banks on a rotational basis every second or third year to maintain a rank tussocky sward to one bank.	Wildlife Conservation Partnership	Annually to 2020	Length and quality of improved habitat.	Provide illustrated management guidelines
KE2	Provide artificial nesting sites on these habitat corridors, having regard for existing breeding pairs.		Identify existing and potential nesting and foraging habitat and include records in an environmental database.	Wildlife Conservation Partnership	Annually to 2020	Inventory of breeding sites in district.	Provide gis map
KE3	Disseminate the levels of success that are being achieved.		Instigate a well-structured rolling programme of pole and pump-mounted nestbox installation sited at 2 km intervals on the network.	Wildlife Conservation Partnership	Annually to 2020	Number of nestboxes installed.	Report in year of completion and in five-yearly report
KE4	Develop a knowledge of Kestrel distribution and abundance within the district.		Undertake annual monitoring of nestboxes to determine occupancy and breeding success.	Wildlife Conservation Partnership	Annual audit.	Annual audit of success.	Report in an annual monitoring and maintenance report
KE5	Mitigate the impact of any site development or maintenance works on Kestrels		Identify existing and potential nesting and foraging habitat and include records in an environmental database.	Wildlife Conservation Partnership	Annually	Monitoring and recording the success of mitigation work.	Report individual site works
KE6	Raise awareness of Board staff, managing agents and contractors about the significance of Kestrels in the IDB district, their obligations for the conservation of this 'Amber Listed' species for which there is concern.		Instigate training for Board members, staff and contractors.	Wildlife Conservation Partnership	2011	Training sessions held and advisory publications produced.	Provide leaflet