



## A String of Pearls

A warm, sunny Saturday was well deserved after yet another seasonally wet and windy week. Often those stormy mornings are an ideal recipe for a few unusual migrants to drop down on the lakes or wetlands, but it all depends on the wind. Keeping an eye on the wind is key for birding in migration. Weather Underground is a great site (and app) to help track the changes in wind. Larger spring migration pushes are beholden to southerly winds. For raptors and other diurnal migrants, a warm, sunny day with south winds, like this Saturday, are a perfect concoction. For nocturnal migrants like most of our neo-tropical song birds, southern winds through the night are important to watch. Days without this southern wind are not necessarily bad days, but are important days to reconsider where to bird. Think like a bird. What are migrants eating, and where is the food? Younger forests or shrubs often provide protection from the elements and harbor that precious food source for migrants; insects.

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## A Week in Birds



White-crowned Sparrow: By Zach Adams

Perfectly symbolizing this past week of birds and status of migration are the sparrows that have arrived in their zipping, ground-skulking cohorts. Unlike the symphonic arrival of each new warbler with their pneumatic known songs, the sparrows arrive below our feet with buzzes and chips. As if overnight (and very likely so) savannah sparrows have begun to swarm grassy field edges with little more than a “seep” to betray their presence amongst the blades. Once the search image kicks-in, whether by ear or eye, they are suddenly everywhere. Just a few weeks ago, a Savannah Sparrow would have spurred the orange R (Rare) on an eBird checklist, but in the last week, numbers over a dozen have been the norm. The grassy areas around the Pittsfield Airport have been excellent locations to catch the density of Savannah Sparrows as they move through the county. Wild Acres Park, located on the East Side of the Airport, is a great place to watch their feeding groups move all around with their buzzy song becoming friendly and familiar. A relative, the Vesper Sparrow, has also made a fine appearance, but far more subtly. Their hardly unique features leave them passed-by in a group of song and savannah sparrows; their white eye ring and “tail flashes” are the diagnostic key to pinning down this tough bird. Vesper Sparrows, like many of their skulking, sparrowy colleagues, are trying challenge for each migration.

Similarly less vocal a few birds of prey have begun to increase their prevalence. Bald Eagles, Osprey, Broad-winged Hawks, and Falcons have all begun assembling in the county. River valleys and water bodies attract the fish-eating Eagles and Osprey. The Housatonic River around Woods Pond is an ideal location to catch

both residents and migrators. Though Osprey are not yet to be confirmed as breeders in the Berkshires, 2020 could be the year. The summer of 2019 was home to multiple osprey without a known nest, making this year another great candidate for success. These nests could be almost anywhere near our many lakes and waterways in the Berkshires and will take all of our eyes to find. Another bird of prey that is a known breeder in the county arrived in purely astounding numbers this week, the American Kestrel. During migration it is not uncommon to see a handful or more Kestrels in one location, but this past week brought an all-time Berkshire County high-count of 21 birds at the Pittsfield Airport.<sup>6</sup> This incredible movement of an endlessly exciting bird of prey is has made the American Kestrel the Bird of the Week.

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## Bird of the Week

### American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*)

In the past few years, Falcons have recently undergone a taxonomic change from being lumped with other birds of prey like hawks to unsupsecting relatives; parrots.<sup>4</sup> Though this is has been a surprise to the bird world, it is interesting to consider the similarities. The American Kestrel, if any, is a a great cadidate to deduce explore some possible similarities. Once named “Sparrow Hawk” this falcon has never been known for its large size, rather as prey for many other raptors.<sup>1</sup> This could possibly explain the resemblance of the two dots on the back-side of a Kestrel’s head to eyes. Kestrels, unlike many birds of prey are striking in color and sexually dimorphic in plumage, with the males coated by deep slate-blue wings. Known for hovering over fields as they search for prey, a sunny day reveals perfect pearls of white that stand alone on the tips of each tail feather and known to some bird watchers as a “string of pearls.”<sup>2</sup> This hovered flight is observed over open fields with the bird dropping a few feet at a time, pausing, and continuing its decent. First discovered in Eurasian Kestrels, the American Kestrel shares a similar hunting technique of hovring, but while doing so, both Kestrels use their extremely sharp UV vision to search for urine patterns of voles and other small rodents that meander through fields.<sup>1</sup> The placid farmland of Sheffield has offered picturesque opportunities to enjoy this hovered stunt.



American Kestrel: By Zach Adams

American Kestrels are the most widespread of North American falcons, and unlike many relatives, they hunt from perches (as seen on almost every runway light at the Pittsfield Airport). Their large range is similar to their diet that range from rodents to reptails, amphibians, birds, and even large insects.<sup>5</sup> Here in the Berkshires, their nest boxes are a common sight in large, protected plots of grasslands like Canoe Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary and almost resemble a Wood Duck box, except on a tall pole in an open field. The density of Kestrels in the Berkshires this week is brought on by their migration back to the Berkshires and these nest boxes. Although most Kestrels are shorter distance migrants, many do not winter anywhere close to the Berkshires due to both food availabilitly and need for warmer temperatures. For those Kestrels that do winter in colder climes, if torpor (lowered body temp and metabolism) is reached, it could take a Kestrel 12 hours to re-heat the next day.<sup>3</sup> This would seem like ages for such a small and busy bird that often appears to save energy in their extremely swift motions. Similarly as aggressive, their “ki ki ki ki ki ki ki ki” call splits through even the harsh winds of open country. Though the imagery and fascination of Kestrels could easily suffice a tome and a half, take advantage of the sun and wind, and find your own string of pearls.

## Works Cited

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