

## FEATURED PHOTO

### FIRST DOCUMENTATION OF A EURASIAN KESTREL IN CALIFORNIA

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The Eurasian Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) is among the most wide-ranging of raptors of the Old World, occurring as a breeder throughout Europe, North Africa, and much of Asia, including Japan (del Hoyo et al. 1994, Ferguson-Lees and Christie 2001). As many as eleven subspecies have been described (del Hoyo et al. 1994), and the AOU (1998) categorized the species as casual or accidental in North America.

The Eurasian Kestrel has not been confirmed previously in California. Rottenborn and Morlan (2000) discussed an account by Palmer (1988) of a putative *F. tinnunculus* that rode a ship from Japan to Humboldt Bay, California, in 1978. That bird was caught alive and turned over to Humboldt State University and, in 1979, was examined by falcon experts Clayton White and Sandy Boyce, who confirmed that it was a Eurasian Kestrel (C. White pers. comm.). Slides allegedly of this kestrel were received for review by the California Bird Records Committee in 1997. The images obtained, however, dated 1973, were of a different, larger falcon, possibly a hybrid, so that report remains enigmatic (see Hamilton et al. 2007).

The autumn movement of diurnal raptors over the Marin Headlands, on the north side of the Golden Gate and part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, was discovered in 1972 and described by Binford (1979). In 1983, Howell and Shor (1985) co-founded a long-term, volunteer-staffed banding station at the site, research now managed under the auspices of the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory (GGRO) with oversight from the National Park Service. Through 2007, GGRO banders had trapped 28,027 individual raptors of 15 species.

On 23 October 2007, during routine fall banding in the Marin Headlands, Marin County, California, we trapped, banded, and released a juvenile female Eurasian Kestrel, which we document here as the first occurrence of this species in California. The bird was caught in a spring-loaded bow-net at 14:56 hrs at Slacker Hill (elevation ~260 m) approximately 1.6 km northwest of the Golden Gate bridge's north landing.

The kestrel was weighed and measured (following Baldwin et al. 1931), photographed in the blind and in natural light, and subsequently released where captured at 16:14 hrs. We identified the bird by plumage characteristics, including facial and wing markings, as well as linear measurements and weight (Clark and Wheeler 2001). Note that in both photos featured on this issue's back cover the Eurasian Kestrel has a single malar stripe, in contrast with the American Kestrel's (*F. sparverius*) paired malars. In the bottom photo, the kestrel's extended left wing shows no light markings in the outer primaries. It lacks the light brown spots on the inner vanes of the American Kestrel's primaries, as seen in a dorsal view. Measurements of the larger and heavier Eurasian Kestrel are compared to those for 343 female American Kestrels banded in the Marin Headlands from 1983 through 2003 in Table 1.

In the field, the Lesser Kestrel (*F. naumanni*), another small Eurasian falcon, can be difficult to distinguish from *F. tinnunculus*, especially in juvenile and female plumages. The traits discernible in hand, however—talon color, facial markings, tail length, and relative lengths of primaries 7 and 10—distinguish them easily (Clark and Yosef 1998, Forsman 1999) and so did not confound our identification. The top photo shows one of these traits, the slight dark line behind the eye, a diagnostic characteristic of *F. tinnunculus* lacking in *F. naumanni* (Clark and Schmitt 1999).

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**Table 1** Measurements of Kestrels Captured in Marin County, California

	Female American Kestrels mean (range)	Eurasian Kestrel as measured
Band size	3, 3B	4
Mass	116 g (97–135)	207.7 g
Wing chord	194 mm (182–205)	238 mm
Tail	127 mm (117–137)	161 mm
Exposed culmen	12.1 mm (10.8–13.5)	14.2 mm
Tarsus depth	4.4 mm (3.8–5.1)	6.4 mm
Hallux	9.6 mm (8.4–10.8)	11.4 mm

We compared measurements of the banded kestrel to published measurements for *F. t. tinnunculus* (Cramp and Simmons 1980). The extensive size overlap between males and females did not allow us to identify the bird's age and sex from measurements alone, but plumage traits—the width of the dark brown barring on the back and upperwing coverts, wider dark tail bands, and heavy ventral streaking on breast and belly (Clark and Yosef 1998, Clark and Schmitt 1999, Forsman 1999)—allowed us to age and sex the bird with confidence.

Juvenile female Eurasian Kestrels have wide dark brown barring of even width on the back and upperwing coverts, whereas adult females have reddish brown coverts with short dark brown triangular bars (Clark and Schmitt 1999). Most juvenile males show some rufous back feathers with dark diamond-shaped markings (Clark and Yosef 1998, Forsman 1999) sparser than those of the juvenile female. Similar patterns are true for the dorsal aspect of the tail: the juvenile male has narrower dark bands than the juvenile female (Clark and Schmitt 1999). The bottom photo shows the dark barring of even width on the back and upper wing coverts, running down onto the tail, all indicating the juvenile female plumage.

The undertail shows another trait that distinguishes juveniles from the adult female. The black subterminal spot on the ventral side of the outer (#6) rectrix is moon- or bowl-shaped on juveniles; the adult female's rectrix spot is more squarish with a black point aligned upward with the feather shaft (Forsman 1999). Our photos show a clear bowl-shaped dark mark, with no upward point, on the underside of the outer tail feather.

On the adult female, the dorsal side of the tail is ash-gray to brownish gray with often incomplete blackish brown bars, an off-white tip, and black subterminal band (Cramp and Simmons 1980). Those of juvenile females are reddish brown with noticeably wider dark brown bands (Clark and Schmitt 1999). Our photos show a pattern like the juvenile female as described; however, our photos also show two dark-barred grayish uppertail coverts like those found on adult females. Clark and Schmitt (1999) noted that “new adult feathers of the proper sex begin showing on back and uppertail coverts by first autumn.” By contrast, juvenile males would show unbarred gray new uppertail coverts (Clark and Yosef 1998). Forsman (1999) commented that 40% of Eurasian Kestrels in Britain show “at least some adult-type feathers by September.” Similarly, almost all of more than 40 juvenile Eurasian Kestrels captured in autumn in Israel showed adult feathers on their backs and uppertail coverts (W. S. Clark pers. comm.).

No fault bars, often useful in distinguishing juveniles from adults, were detected in the flight feathers. Also, we found no evidence—in feather, bill, or talon wear, in condition of soft parts, or from communications with regional falconers—that this individual had been held in captivity.

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Pranty et al. (2004) listed 18 verified records of the Eurasian Kestrel in North America, 11 of them from coastal Alaska. Two are from Canada (British Columbia, New Brunswick/Nova Scotia line), one each from New Jersey, Florida, and Washington state, and two from Massachusetts. The California record is the third and most southerly of the Eurasian Kestrel on the Pacific coast of North America south of Alaska.

One of the aforementioned Alaska records is based on a specimen collected on Shemya Island and identified to subspecies by R. C. Banks as *F. t. interstinctus*, the easternmost subspecies, occurring from northern Japan and mainland China south to Malaya and the Philippines (Gibson 1981). Whether or not other sightings from western North America have been of this subspecies is unknown, but the geographic and seasonal pattern of the records, from coastal Alaska (spring and fall) to British Columbia (winter; Campbell 1985), coastal Washington (fall–winter; Anderson 2005), and now coastal California (fall), suggests Asia as the likely source of these birds.

Finally, the bird we report here was reviewed by the California Birds Record Committee (CBRC 2007-272) and accepted unanimously as a new species for the state (J. Morlan pers. comm.).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## **Western Field Ornithologists 33rd Annual Meeting**

**9–12 October 2008, San Mateo, California**

WFO will hold its 33rd annual meeting in San Mateo, California, this fall with Dr. Carla Cicero giving the keynote address on Saturday evening, 11 October—the Grinnell Resurvey Project: A Century of Avifaunal Change in California.

Visit WFO's website, [www.westernfieldornithologists.org](http://www.westernfieldornithologists.org), for registration information, science session abstracts and speakers, and the schedule of activities, including workshops addressing field skills and all-day (Thursday and Sunday) and half-day (Friday and Saturday) field trips.

The registration fee includes science sessions on Friday and Saturday afternoons, exhibitors' displays, an opening reception, book signing, and expert sound- and slide-identification panels moderated by Nathan Pieplow and Ed Harper. A special reception on Friday evening 10 October highlights the launch of WFO's monograph series with Dave Shuford speaking on California Bird Species of Special Concern.

In conjunction with the meeting, Shearwater Journeys is offering two pelagic trips, one departing from Bodega Bay on Thursday 9 October, the other from Santa Cruz on Monterey Bay on Sunday 12 October. WFO members get a \$30 discount on each trip.

We hope to see you in San Mateo!