



CRITTER CONNECTIONS



Fascinating Falcons





Honey Mesquite



Honey Mesquite tree

Texas is home to the *Prosopis grandulosa*, a native plant commonly known as the Honey Mesquite. The Honey Mesquite can be found throughout the state but is the most common in South and West Texas. Its growth pattern can change based on its location! For example, it will grow only a few feet tall and is considered thorny brush in the dry environments of West Texas, but down in South Texas where there is more moisture, it can grow to be a small tree over 30 feet tall. This plant flowers from May to September producing yellow-green flowers and a legume, or bean, often called a seed pod. This seed



Honey Mesquite seed pods

pod looks like a green bean and can vary in color from green, to brown, to yellow depending on its stage of growth.

The Honey Mesquite is mighty important to wildlife. The plant's beans, or seed pods, are a valuable food source for wildlife like white-tailed deer and javelina during the hottest months of the Texas summer when food is limited. The Honey Mesquite's flowers are an important source for pollinators as well. Some bees even make honey using the flower's nectar! This plant is also used by many bird species for nesting. Our friends the American Kestrel and Crested Caracara have been known to use the high-reaching limbs of Honey Mesquite as perches.

Like many other legume plants, the Honey Mesquite has special nodules, or bumps, on its roots. These little bumps act like a fertilizer factory by working with soil bacteria to pull nitrogen from the air into the soil. This nitrogen rich soil gives plants the nutrients needed to grow. Mesquites also provide shade for the smaller plants around it. Birds that perch in the Honey Mesquites spread the seeds of other plants in their droppings, which is often why you will see such a large variety of plants under mesquites. Because of these traits, many people consider the Honey Mesquite to be a nurse plant, or a plant that supports the growth of other plants. However, if not managed well, the Honey Mesquite can grow fast and form thick groups, or mts. This can make it difficult for farmers and ranchers to maintain their agricultural fields. Still, the benefits of this neat native plant outweigh the challenges. The Honey Mesquite is a staple on the Texas landscape!

Article source from *Trees, Shrubs, & Cacti of South Texas* by James H. Everitt, D. Lynn Drawe, and Robert I. Lonard

Photos by Amber Brown and Don A. W. Carlson

Cover photo American Kestrel by Mick Thompson

Falcon Poem

For many centuries, falcons have been an inspiration to artists, writers and poets! People have referenced falcons' beautiful colors and markings, powerful bodies, sleek wings and graceful flight in their work. Use your knowledge of Texas falcons, their diet, habitat and conservation challenges to write your own poem about these incredible critters!

Did you know...



- ...that some falcons migrate?
- ...that falcons have pointed wings?
- ...that falcons have a curved beak?
- ...that falcons eat other birds?
- ...that falconers train captive falcons to hunt?
- ...that the Aplomado falcon is endangered?
- ...that the American Kestrel is the smallest falcon in North America?
- ...that the Peregrine falcon can reach speeds of over 200 mph?
- ...that the Caracara is a member of the falcon family?
- ...that Texas has rare bird sightings?



Peregrine Falcon

Photo by Parth Kansara

Color Me



American Kestrel

(*Falco sparverius*)

Activity source: Sheri Amsel - www.exploringnature.org

Photo by Stan Lupo



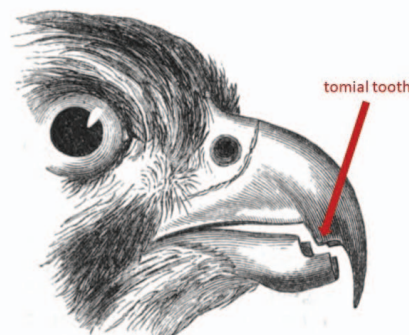
Fascinating Falcons



By Amber Brown

Look up, in the sky! What's soaring above? If it's winter in Texas, there is a good chance you are seeing falcons that are migrating through. Texas is home to many falcon species. The most well known falcons are the Aplomado falcon, American Kestrel and Peregrine falcon. These birds are either resident, meaning they live here year-round, or migratory, meaning they live here for only part of the year. Most birds like songbirds are spring migrants and will migrate to Texas in the spring, stay here for the warm months, and leave in the fall. But falcons will migrate here in the fall, stay in Texas for the winter, and leave in the spring like many other birds of prey. Birds of prey is a term used to describe birds that are predators. This includes falcons, hawks, eagles and owls.

Falcons belong to the Falconidae family, which includes falcons and caracaras. Falcons have long, arched wings that end in a point, sharp curved beaks and sharp talons on their feet. Typically, falcons have smaller bodies and longer wings than other birds of prey. This helps them to fly fast. Some falcons can even fly over 200 miles per hour! This speed helps the falcons while hunting. Falcons are predators, meaning they will prey on smaller animals. Their diet typically includes small mammals like mice, small birds, insects and even snakes. A falcon's beak has a **tomial tooth**, which is not a tooth but is a unique groove that is used when capturing prey. Falcons are such great hunters that some people, called **falconers**, train captive falcons to hunt. These



Falcon beak with tomial tooth

falconers help educate the public about the importance of falcons and help spread the message of conservation.

Falcons are very strong, powerful creatures. This is why falcons have been inspiration for poets, writers and artists for centuries and are still seen as school mascots to this day. Let us take a deep dive into some of the falcons we can find in our state!

The Aplomado falcon is a small but mighty member of the falcon family. This falcon is about 12 inches tall and has a two-foot wingspan! They eat small birds, small mammals and insects. Aplomado falcons can be found year-round in the very southern tip of the Texas gulf coast. There have also been rare sightings of this falcon in deep West Texas where they are likely from a native population in northwestern Mexico. The Aplomado falcon lives in open prairies and grasslands and uses trees or yuccas as perches, or a place to sit. This falcon was once common across South and West Texas but almost disappeared after the 1930s. Because of this, the Aplomado Falcon was listed as endangered by the United States and Mexico in 1986. Endangered means that a plant or animal is in danger of disappearing forever. Efforts to bring this falcon back to its natural habitat began in 1977. The results have been hopeful, but success will depend on the quality of habitat.



Aplomado falcon

Another endangered falcon we have in Texas is the Peregrine falcon. These powerful falcons are identified by their blue-gray back and black markings on their head that look like a moustache or an aviator's helmet. Peregrine falcons are winter migrants for Texas, meaning they are here during the winter. They prefer to live on coastal prairies, shorelines, lakes and streams but can sometimes be found in Houston, where they use skyscrapers like a cliff-side perch as they hunt for birds along the bayous. This falcon is one of the fastest birds in the world. It can fly over 200 miles per hour when swooping for prey! The Peregrine Falcon is at the top of its food chain. Their diet includes small birds like songbirds and pigeons, small waterfowl, bats and small mammals. Peregrine falcons,



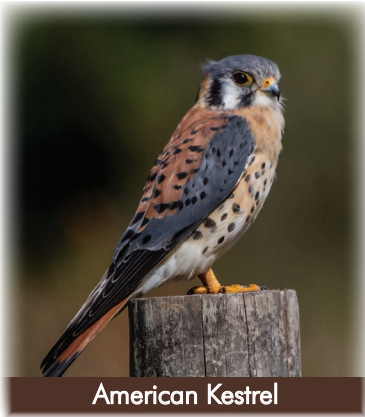
Peregrine falcon



like Aplomado falcons, have faced many challenges. They were once common but almost vanished from Texas and North America in the 1960s. Through the work of scientists, biologists, falconers, citizens and the Peregrine Fund, this falcon was returned to its former range. Still, the Peregrine Falcon has been listed as a Texas endangered species since 1974.

American Kestrels are the smallest falcon in North America. However, do not be fooled, this pint-sized bird is still a force to be reckoned with. The American Kestrel is only about ten inches tall and has the long, arched, pointed wings that are an identifying characteristic of the falcon family. In the winter, these birds perch on power lines or fence posts along open fields to get a better view of the ground while looking for prey. This falcon will sometimes hover mid-air over a field before swooping for its next meal, usually small rodents like mice, lizards, snakes, insects and small birds. If the American Kestrel cannot finish its meal, it will store the leftovers in a tree or in a clump of grass to eat later. The American Kestrel is known for the two striking black lines on its blue gray head. The females and males of this species are **dimorphic**, meaning they are different colors. Females are duller rust and tan colors, while males are brighter and have blue-gray wings. These falcons are winter migrants, meaning they arrive in Texas in the fall and leave in the spring. While here, they can be found in open fields like pastures, farm fields, deserts, parks, grasslands, prairies and marshes. They nest in tree cavities, nest boxes and even old woodpecker holes!

The Crested Caracara is a unique falcon. It has the wing shape of a hawk, looks like an eagle and will eat dead animals like scavengers! Still, this cool critter is a part of the falcon family. The Crested Caracara is mostly brownish black with white markings on its head, under its wings and on its tail. Its most notable feature is the long, black feathers on the top of its head that look like a toupee. Caracaras are quiet birds. They do not make calls like other birds but will make a rattle sound if they are disturbed. Their diet includes mammals, reptiles and carrion. **Carrion** is the dead and decaying flesh of an animal. These birds can



American Kestrel



Crested Caracara

be found in South and Southeast Texas year-round. Crested Caracaras have been expanding their range and have been seen in the Texas Hill Country. What a cool falcon!

What makes Texas so unique for birds? Texas is so large that it contains multiple different habitats that are home to many kinds of wildlife, birds included. Some of the habitats found in Texas include wet bayous and marshes, dry deserts, tall forests, open grasslands and so much more. This very diverse landscape is a huge benefit for wildlife and with Texas' location on the migration pathways we sometimes get rare bird sightings, even falcons!

Falcons, like other birds, face challenges in the future due to things like the loss of habitat to fast growing urban areas, pollution and fragmentation. **Fragmentation** is when a large, undisturbed area of habitat is broken up or disturbed. Protection for migratory birds can be even trickier since these birds only spend part of their life here each year. Biologists from multiple states and countries must work together to make sure we are all doing what is best for our shared resources.

Falcons are a tough critter that we are lucky to have in our state. While they still face many obstacles, through the hard work of scientists, biologists and everyday citizens we can make a difference. Next time you are outside, look around and see if you can spot these exceptional Texas falcons!



Flying Aplomado Falcon

WORD BANK

- Tomial tooth** - a groove on the beak of falcons that is used when capturing prey
- Falconers** - people who train captive falcons to hunt
- Dimorphic** - two different colors in the same species
- Carrion** - dead and decaying flesh of an animal
- Fragmentation** - when a large, undisturbed area is broken up or disturbed

Article sources: Book of Texas Birds by Gary Clark

<https://sciencing.com/characteristics-falcons-10048987.html>

<https://texasbirding.org/>

<https://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/wild/species/aplomfal/>

<https://txtbba.tamu.edu/species-accounts/peregrine-falcon/>

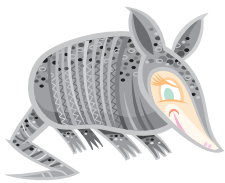
Photo Sources: Mick Thompson, John Mangold, Andy Morffew, Julio Mulero

Falcon Word Find

D I U H A Y A T N Y G D E E K
H E G I K J A O O G D H J A M
P Q R K L T P E C C R N R I S
H M W E I K P K L Y K F G T V
O I Z B G M E D A V U R J I C
D Z A T Q N H S F X A B E B A
I H B Y L M A L T T D S K K R
M K R V L I I D I R I M O A A
K Q U B R F E O N L E D I E C
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I D B S M S P L M T C V V I Y
H C R E P R P I R A Z S E G O
N O L A T A P E R E G R I N E

FIND THESE WORDS:

Aplomado
Beak
Caracara
Endangered
Falcon
Fly
Habitat
Kestrel
Migration
Perch
Peregrine
Talon



Nancy's Corner



Birding can be a fun and easy way to spend more time in nature. Texas is a popular birding spot because it is home to over 640 bird species! This is due to the different habitats, weather and landscapes of our state. Birders, or people who enjoy watching birds, will travel from all over the country and even the world to look at Texas' birds. Lucky for us we don't need to travel far!

Birds are all around us. They can be seen around your house, at the park and even at school. Next time you go outside, try birding! Look and listen for birds. Be sure to stand still and watch from a safe distance as to not scare or hurt the birds. Write down what kind of birds you see. What color are they? What sounds do they make? Think about how each one is important to our ecosystems.

You can use a field guide, online website or a free app like Merlin Bird ID to help you identify the birds you find. You can even use websites like eBird to contribute to science by documenting what you saw. How neat is that?!





Formal Education Programs

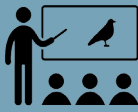
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TWA is a membership-based, non-profit organization whose goal is to educate all people, especially the youth of Texas about conservation, management and stewardship of wildlife and habitat on private land.

All education programs are made possible through memberships, grants and donations. Learn more about the levels of membership as well as the educational programs TWA offers on our website.

All membership levels include a one-year subscription to the TWA monthly *Texas Wildlife* magazine.

Membership Levels:

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___ Online \$35



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