



IDENTIFICATION

Filed identification of Lesser Kestrel

5 August 2026

By Marc Duquet



1. Male (left) and female Lesser Kestrels, Spain, April 2025 (© Alfonso Rodrigo)

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* breeds throughout the Palearctic, from the Iberian Peninsula to northern China, and winters from the Sahel to southern Africa. In Europe, it breeds mainly in Portugal and Spain, in the south of France (Languedoc-Roussillon and the Crau plain), in Sardinia, in Sicily and the south of the Italian peninsula, as well as along the coasts of Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then from Albania to Bulgaria and Greece (Orta & Kirwan 2020). The post-breeding migration of Iberian birds begins in the second ten-day period of September and takes them to West Africa (Mauritania, Senegal and Mali), where they winter until mid-February (Catry *et al.* 2011). On the Asian continent, the Lesser Kestrel is found across much of Turkey, the Middle East, the Caucasus, Iran, Central Asia, eastwards as far as Inner Mongolia and northern China (Orta & Kirwan *op. cit.*). The species is considered monotypic, but some authors group birds found from Turkestan to China under the name 'pekinensis'. Corso *et al.* (2015) even propose elevating this taxon to the rank of subspecies, due to the marked morphological differences it exhibits compared with European birds (see below).

Whilst the identification of the adult male Lesser Kestrel is fairly straightforward, that of juveniles and females can be very tricky. Here is an overview of the species' various plumages and a summary of the identification criteria in relation to the Common Kestrel, the species to which the Lesser Kestrel most closely resembles.

I – Moulting and plumage of the Lesser Kestrel

Lesser Kestrel acquires its definitive adult plumage at the age of two (3rd calendar year) and goes through three successive plumages: juvenile, second-year and adult. As sexual dimorphism is pronounced, it is possible to distinguish males from females from the second year onwards, and the sex of juveniles can potentially be determined (Ollé *et al.* 2020).

I-1. Juvenile plumage

Juveniles closely resemble adult female: rusty-brown upperparts mottled with black, pale buff underparts finely streaked with black, and a rusty-brown tail barred with black and showing a broad terminal black band. Distinguishing them from the latter is a tricky task, but entirely possible when the bird is observed under favourable conditions (or, ideally, from a photograph). To do so, the progress of the moult is a key factor, visible even from a distance: thus, from May–June to October, adult (and second-year) females have the tips of some flight feathers worn or show moulting contrast in the wing (see I-4), whilst juveniles have uniformly fresh plumage, with the trailing edge of the wings smooth and edged with cream (photo 2).



2. Lesser Kestrel, juvenile, Spain, July 2025 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez).
Note the smooth trailing edge of the wing (new feathers) and the belly streaked.



3. Lesser Kestrel, adult female, Spain, May 2025 (© Miguel Rouco).
Note the irregular (worn) trailing edge of the wing and the belly spotted.

The **plumage** patterns differ somewhat: 1°) the adult female has a spotted breast and flanks (black spots shaped like arrows or hearts), whilst the underparts are streaked in juveniles (thick streaks ending in arrowheads in the female, or fine streaks on the breast and broader ones on the flanks in the male), 2°) on the back, scapulars and lesser upperwing coverts, the black bars are fine and chevron-shaped in the adult female, thicker in the juvenile female, and less distinct and dot-shaped in the juvenile male, 3°) the greater upperwing coverts of the adult female show fine, straight dark bars, finer than those of juvenile females (which are also curved) and quite similar to those of juvenile males, 4°) the primary coverts of juveniles (photo 4) have a distinct russet-cream margin around the tip, absent in adult females (photo 5); and 5°) the uppertail coverts and the base (and sometimes also the edge) of the tail feathers of adult females are greyish, as in juvenile males, but with the rest of the tail brown, barred with fine, distinct and complete black stripes (irregular bars in the juvenile male), whilst the juvenile female has a tail and uppertail coverts lacking grey tones.



4. Lesser Kestrel, juvenile, Spain, July 2024 (© Zbigniew Kajzer).
Note the broad, russet-cream edge on the primary coverts.



5. Lesser Kestrel, female, Spain, April 2023 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez).
Note the primary coverts lacking a cream-coloured edge.

The **sex** of some juveniles (the most typical ones) can be determined when viewed under very good conditions (photo 6), but many are similar and cannot be sexed. **Juvenile male** : 1°) all the upperwing coverts appear clean, with a few scattered spots, particularly on the lesser coverts; 2°) greater coverts finely barred, with the black bars being much finer than the brown spaces; 3°) fine streaks on the underside, but wider on the flanks; and 4°) uppertail coverts and tail (at least the base) tinged with grey (the tail may be mostly grey and indistinctly barred, in which case it resembles that of the adult male – see photo 67). **Juvenile female** : 1°) broad black bands on the mantle and well-defined spots on the upperwing coverts, 2°) greater coverts marked with broad black bands curving towards the sides and often joining together, with the width of the black bars and the brown spaces being similar, 3°) thick, arrowhead-shaped streaks on the flanks and 4°) tail and uppertail coverts entirely brown, without grey tips (Ollé *et al.* 2020).

I-2. Formative moult (= post-juvenile)

Juveniles undergo their partial formative moult from October to May, with an interruption during the post-breeding migration. This moult is restricted to the body feathers, the scapulars and the lesser and median coverts (in some birds, it extends to most or all of the coverts). It begins with the uppertail coverts and continues onto the mantle, nape and crown. Generally, only the central pair of tail-feathers (or even a single feather) moult, but sometimes the entire tail is replaced. This moult does not affect the primaries or secondaries (Cramp & Simmons 2020). The remaining scapulars and upperwing coverts, as well as the juvenile flight feathers and tail feathers of second-year birds, will be replaced from June of the second calendar year onwards, during the basic moult (see I-4).



6. Juvenile Lesser Kestrels, female (left) and male, Spain, July 2025 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez). Compare the dark markings on lesser and median upperwing coverts (1), the thickness of the black bars on the greater coverts (2), the shape of the black markings on the flanks (3) and the colour of the uppertail coverts (4), as well as the difference in size, which is quite evident here, the male being smaller than the female. The numbers correspond to those in the text above. Note that the plumage of this young male is already quite worn, with the broad edging on the greater coverts now barely visible.

I-3. Second-year plumage

This plumage is characterised by a moult contrast between new adult-type feathers and retained juvenile feathers, with the flight feathers and (outer) tail feathers still juvenile and therefore quite worn. The sex of second-year birds can be easily determined, as males have already acquired the adult's grey head and (at least part of) the grey tail.

Second-year female (photos 7 & 8): very similar to the adult female, but 1°) denser and coarser black spots on the wing coverts and body, 2°) a more pronounced black moustache, 3°) worn flight feathers, and 4°) often a mixture of new (central) and old (outer) tail feathers. Furthermore, the underlying colour of the wing coverts is more rusty and brighter in the adult female, and more yellow and duller in the second-year female (as the feathers are worn and discoloured), and the black bars on the greater coverts and tertials are thicker, more visible, coarser and more irregular in the second-year female than in the adult (Corso 2001).



7. Lesser Kestrel, second-year female, Spain, June 2024 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez). Note the moult contrast in the primary feathers, with P4 and P5 being new (darker).



8. Lesser Kestrel, second-year female, Spain, June 2022 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez). Note the new P4 on both wings and the (very short) P5 regrowing on the left wing.

Second-year male : in spring, similar to the adult male, but the tertials and upperwing greater coverts (and some median coverts) are still juvenile, russet-brown barred with black, as are the flight feathers and tail feathers (at least the outer ones – photos 10 & 14). In summer, many second-year males have begun to moult some of their lesser and median wing coverts (at most, only a few barred inner greater coverts and the tertials remain – photo 16), whilst others still retain most of their juvenile wing coverts (photos 9 & 12).



9. Lesser Kestrel, second-year male, Spain, April 2026 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez).
Note the adult-type central tail feathers and the fact that all the greater coverts are still juvenile.



10. Lesser Kestrel, second-year male, Spain, July 2025 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez).
Note the central pair of tail feathers, which have already moulted and is of male-type.



11. Lesser Kestrel, adult male, Spain, May 2023 (© Kevin Hughes).
Note the blue-grey adult-type tertials and greater coverts.



12. Lesser Kestrel, second-year male, Spain, March 2024 (© Kevin Hughes).
Note that all the upperwing coverts and tail feathers are still of juvenile-type.



13. Lesser Kestrel, adult male, Spain, May 2026 (© Juan Granados Martín).
Note the very white flight feathers and the underwing coverts, which are barely mottled.



14. Lesser Kestrel, second-year male, Spain, March 2024 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez).
Note the pair of central tail feathers typical of an adult male and the heavily spotted coverts.



15. Lesser Kestrel, adult male, Spain, March 2023 (© César Díez González).
Note that some of the greater coverts are fringed with reddish-brown, but without black bars.

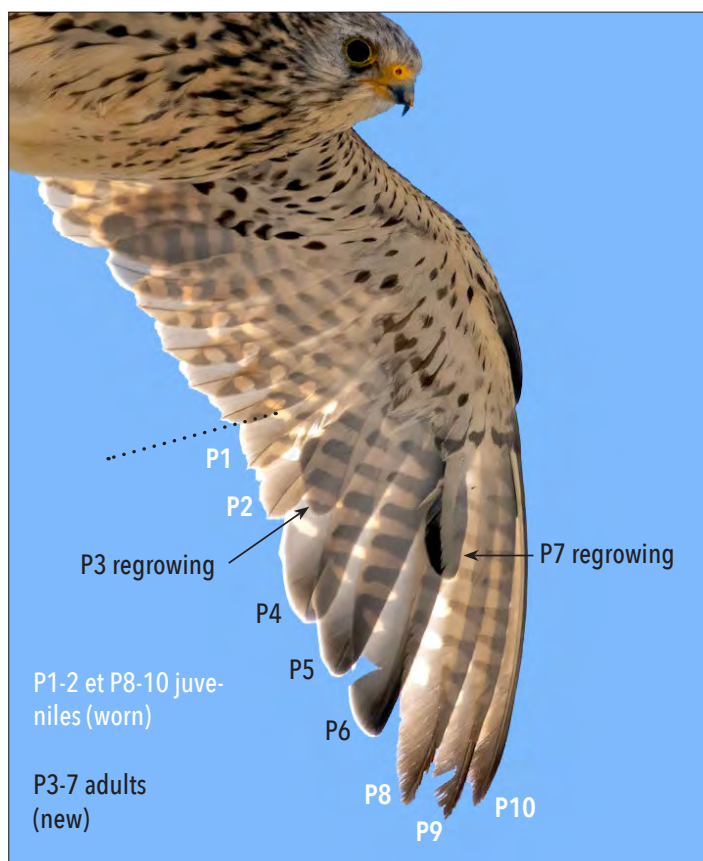


16. Lesser Kestrel, second-year male, Spain, May 2025 (© Miguel Rouco).
Note the tertials still juvenile and the greater coverts, which have already moulted (grey-blue).

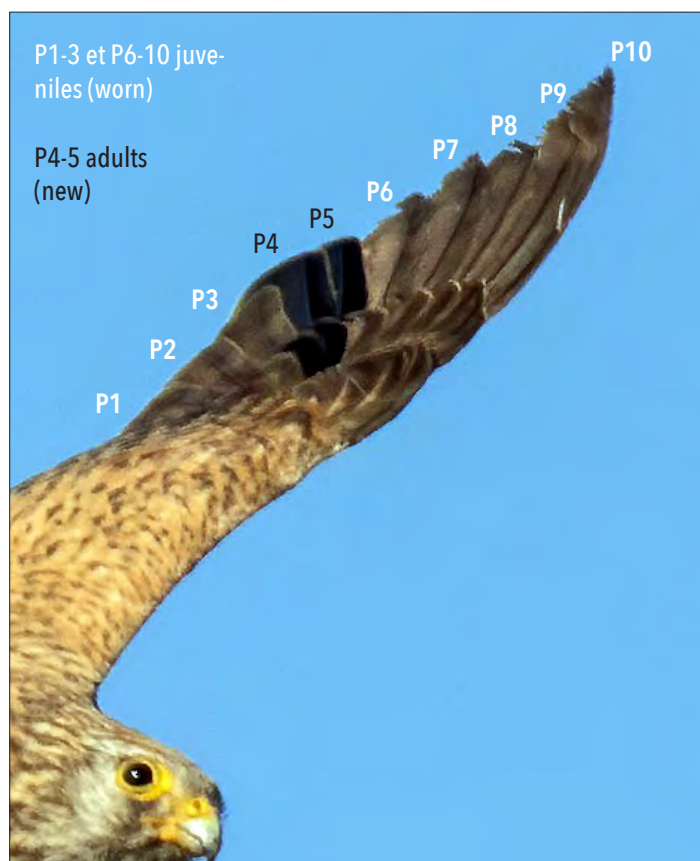
I-4. Basic moult (= *post-breeding*)

Second-year birds and adults begin a complete annual moult from (May) June, suspend it during the autumn migration and complete it in January at their wintering grounds. This moult renews the entire plumage, that is to say, all contour feathers (body and coverts) and all flight feathers (primaries, secondaries and rectrices).

The moulting of falcons' flight feathers does not follow the same pattern at all as that of Accipitriformes (see the example of the Egyptian vulture). It is, in fact, a centrifugal moult, meaning that it begins with the shedding of a median primary (usually P4 or P5, or even P6 in the Lesser Kestrel) and progresses on either side of it, with one wave moving upwards towards the tip of the wing (P10), whilst the other, descending wave moves inwards (P1). During moulting, a falcon therefore displays a cluster of new median primary feathers, surrounded by worn outer and inner primary feathers (photos 17 & 18). The last primary feathers to be replaced – that is, those which may still be of juvenile-type in second-year birds in autumn – are therefore P1 and P10. [Note: in third-year birds (adults), in spring, it is the median primaries that appear the most worn, as they were the first to be replaced (during the previous summer), whilst the outer and inner primaries moulted during the winter and are therefore the newest.]



17. Lesser Kestrel, second-year female, Spain, June 2024 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez)



18. Lesser Kestrel, second-year female, Spain, July 2025 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez)

As with the primaries, moulting of the secondaries begins with the loss of a median feather (usually S5 or S4) and progresses on both sides, towards the outer and inner part of the wing. A third wave of moult then begins from S13, progressing outwards. The last secondary feather to be replaced is therefore the outermost one (S1), adjacent to P1 (Duquet & Reeber 2019). The moulting of the tail feathers, meanwhile, begins with the central pair R1 and ends with the outer feathers R6 (Cramp & Simmons *op. cit.*).

I-5. Adult plumage

This plumage is totally lacking juvenile feathers on the body and wing coverts; the tail feathers and flight feathers are relatively new, and the primary coverts lack pale tips (see I-1 and II-5).



19. Lesser Kestrels, adult female (left) and adult male, Spain, May 2024 (© Josep del Hoyo).

Note the female's very pale head and predominantly grey tail, indicating an older bird. The adult male, with his typical plumage, is also a fully mature adult.

As in Common Kestrel, males and females have very different plumages. **Adult female:** 1°) brown head streaked with black; 2°) russet-brown tail barred with black (sometimes tinged with greyish) with a broad black terminal bar; 3°) back, scapulars and upperwing coverts russet-brown mottled with black, 4°) cream-coloured underparts marked with teardrop-shaped black spots and 5°) underwing coverts spotted with black, contrasting with the pale, sparsely mottled flight feathers. **Adult male:** 1°) plain (unstreaked) grey-blue head; 2°) rump and uppertail coverts plain grey-blue; 3°) grey, unbarred tail, the tail feathers ending in a broad black band; 4°) back, scapulars, and lesser and median coverts plain russet-brown without spots; 5°) a broad grey-blue band on the wings, formed by the tertials and the greater upperwing coverts, 6°) salmon-coloured underparts faintly speckled with black, and 7°) underwing largely whitish, with a few sparse black spots on the axillaries and the underwing coverts.

I-6 Geographical variation

Corso *et al.* (2015, 2016) highlighted the significant morphological differences between the European and East Asian populations of the Lesser Kestrel (Fig. 1), the latter having been treated as a subspecies (*pekinensis*) until the 1970s. Indeed, at the end of the 19th century, Swinhoe (1870) had described *Falco chenchris pekinensis* on the basis of two Lesser Kestrels (one adult male and one immature male) collected in Beijing (China). Chinese Lesser Kestrels are thus distinguished from European birds by the plumage of the adult male, whose russet-brown back is more saturated and the blue-grey of the head is darker, whilst the blue-grey of the wing extends to almost all the upperwing coverts; most birds retain a slight rusty tinge on the inner lesser and median coverts, as well as on the marginal coverts (leading edge of the wing). Corso *et al.* (2015, 2016) proposed reinstating the subspecies *naumanni* (western) and *pekinensis* (eastern), which had been considered synonyms by taxonomists, arguing that there was clinal variation between the two taxa, with birds exhibiting intermediate plumage from Western Asia to Central Asia. However, as Corso *et al.* (2015, 2016) point out, this is also the case for several other species of birds of prey, such as the Common Buzzard, the Black Kite and the Peregrine Falcon, which are nevertheless considered polytypic. But taxonomists have been demonstrating to us in recent years that their discipline is extremely versatile and that their decisions are, in some cases, more random and arbitrary than rational and well-founded (see, for example, *AviList 2025: new taxonomic U-turns*).

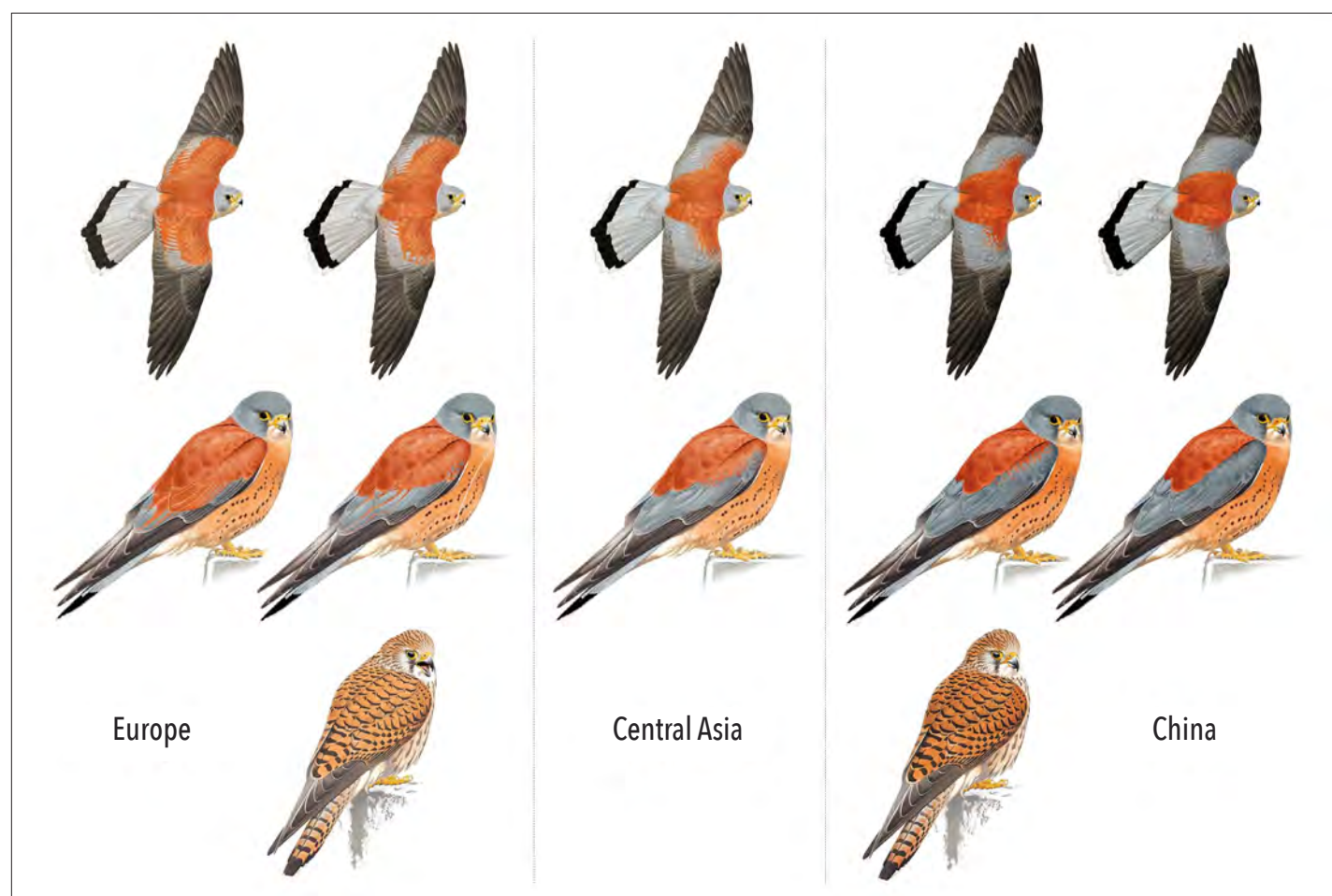


Fig. 1. Geographical variation in the Lesser Kestrel from west to east (illustrations by Lorenzo Starnini, taken from Corso *et al.* 2016).

Note the blue-grey colour extending to the median and lesser coverts and the increasingly intense reddish colour towards the east. The female's plumage is also more saturated, but remains very similar.

II – Identification criteria in relation to Common Kestrel

II-1. Wing formula and behaviour

In flight, Lesser Kestrel has a slightly more compact build, a shorter tail and less pointed wings than the Common Kestrel (Forsman 2017). This latter characteristic, visible in all plumages, is linked to the wing formula, which differs between the two species. In the Lesser Kestrel (photo 20), the wing tip is formed by three primary feathers (P8-P10), with P10 being significantly longer than P7 and of a length close to that of P8 and P9, resulting in a rounded wing tip. In the Common Kestrel (photo 21), the wing tip is formed by two primary feathers (P8 and P9), the longest of the pair, which give the wing a more pointed shape, whilst P7 and P10 are shorter and of equal length.



20. Lesser Kestrel, juvenile, Spain, August 2022 (© Isabel Gómez Carrasco).
Note the long P10, which, together with P8 and P9, forms a rounded wing tip (3 fingers).



21. Kestrel, juvenile, Spain, August 2024 (© Alejandro Sanz).
Note that P10 is as short as P7, leaving P8 and P9 to form a more pointed wing.

Throughout the year, the Lesser Kestrel is highly gregarious and is generally observed in flocks numbering several dozen individuals, whereas the Common Kestrel is most often solitary or lives in pairs throughout the year. However, it readily joins Lesser Kestrels whilst hunting, and may exceptionally forage in small family groups when prey is abundant (such as vole outbreaks, for example).

The Lesser Kestrel frequently feeds in a manner very similar to Red-footed Falcon and Eurasian Hobby, catching and eating insects in flight whilst holding them in one foot – something the Common Kestrel does very rarely.

Overall, there is little difference between the flight patterns of the Lesser Kestrel and the Common Kestrel. However, when hunting side by side whilst hovering, the Lesser Kestrel flaps its wings more vigorously and more rapidly (reflecting its slightly smaller size) and performs shorter hovering flights (Forsman 2017). Its hunting flight is also more erratic and faster than those of the Common Kestrel (Christian Riols *in litt.*).

II-2. Colour of claws

The colour of claws is a key criterion for distinguishing the Lesser Kestrel from the Common Kestrel, particularly in juvenile or female plumage. Both species, in fact, at all ages and regardless of sex, have claws of a very distinct colour: they are typically pale (ivory or horn-coloured) in the Lesser Kestrel (photos 22 & 24), whilst they are dark (black) in the Common Kestrel (photos 23 & 25).



22. Lesser Kestrel, male, Spain, April 2025 (© Maxime Légaré-Vézina)



23. Common Kestrel, male, Spain, March 2023 (© Ana Mendes do Carmo)



24. Lesser Kestrel, female, Spain, June 2024 (© Josep del Hoyo)



25. Common Kestrel, female, Spain, March 2023 (© Ana Mendes do Carmo)

There are a few exceptions to this rule, namely Common Kestrels with one or more pale claws (never all of them) or Lesser Kestrels with greyish claws, but these cases remain extremely rare and do not call into question the value of this criterion. Corso (2001) reported the case of three male and two female Lesser Kestrels (2 % of the sample he studied in Italy) which had brownish-grey or blackish-grey claws, but in no case as black as those of the Common Kestrel. [Also bear in mind that birds with dirty or mud-stained claws may appear dark in the Lesser Kestrel or, conversely, pale in the Common Kestrel!]

I have found references to four cases of Common Kestrels with pale claws, two in the Netherlands (de Schipper 2001) and two in India (Bhatt & Ganpule 2015):

- 17 December 1996, Zeewolde (Flevoland, Netherlands) – a first-winter female with a single yellowish-white claw on the right foot;
- 24 June 2000, Kapelle (Zeeland, Netherlands) – a 27-day-old juvenile whose central claws on both feet were almost white, but the others were deep black;
- 8 December 2008, Nalsarovar (Gujarat, India) – an individual whose inner claws on both feet were pale yellow, similar to those of a Lesser Kestrel, whilst the other claws were a deep black, normal for a Common Kestrel ;
- 13 January 2014, Pune (Maharashtra, India) – a male whose hind toes on both feet had pale yellow claws, the other claws being blackish.

To put the significance of these extreme cases into further perspective, it should be noted that upon hatching, Common Kestrel chicks initially have pale claws, which turn black within a few days whilst the young are still in the nest (Ollé *et al.* 2020). This explains, in particular, the case of the juvenile ringed at the nest in the Netherlands in 2000 (de Schipper 2001).

II-3. Plumage of males

Identifying an adult male Lesser Kestrel poses no difficulty, thanks to its plain russet-brown back without black spots, its plain grey-blue head without a moustache, and the grey-blue wing band formed by the tertials and the greater upperwing coverts (photos 26, 28 & 30). In second-year males (photo 29), these feathers are still of the juvenile type, reddish-brown barred with black, as are the flight feathers and at least some of the tail feathers (often the central pair of tail feathers is already of adult-type), but the unspotted back and the lack of a 'moustache' on the head make it easy to distinguish it from the male Common Kestrel (photos 27 & 31). Furthermore, the criteria mentioned previously – namely the wing formula, the call and the colour of the claws – also apply to males, regardless of their age.



26. Lesser Kestrel, adult male, Spain, June 2017 (© Stefan Hirsch).
Note the unspotted russet-brown back, the grey band on the greater coverts and the pale claws.



27. Common Kestrel, adult male, Spain, January 2023 (© Alfonso Rodrigo).
Note the black-spotted upperparts and wing coverts, and the black claws.



28. Lesser Kestrel, adult male, Spain, May 2023 (© Kevin Hughes).
Note the deep grey-blue colour of the head and the grey-blue wing bar.



29. Lesser Kestrel, second-year male, Spain, April 2025 (© Alfonso Rodrigo).
Note the pale grey head and the still juvenile tertials and greater coverts.



30. Lesser Kestrel, adult male, Spain, April 2023 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez).
The plain russet-brown upperparts and the grey-blue wing bar are typical.



31. Common Kestrel, adult male, England, March 2025 (© Bob Wood).
The back, scapular, tertials and wing coverts are each tipped with a black spot.

In flight, the adult male Lesser Kestrel shows a very pale, almost white underwing, with primary feathers virtually free of dark markings except for the blackish tips, unbarred secondary feathers and white underwing coverts faintly speckled with black (photo 32). Second-year males differ in their juvenile barred secondary flight feathers and tail feathers (photo 9) and their underwing coverts, which are more heavily spotted with black (photos 14). However, both are generally much paler and less speckled or barred on the underside than the male Common Kestrel (photo 33).



32. Lesser Kestrel, adult male, Spain, March 2023 (© Arnau Guardia).
Note the contrast between the whitish flight feathers and the black-speckled underwing coverts.



33. Common Kestrel, adult male, Finland, April 2022 (© Matti Rekilä).
Note the heavily spotted underwing coverts and the flight feathers, which are barred with grey.



34. Lesser Kestrel, adult male, Spain, May 2023 (© Kevin Hughes).
Note the very colourful upperparts, a solid russet-brown, grey-blue and black.



35. Common Kestrel, adult male, England, April 2017 (© Jacob Spinks).
From above, the most striking feature is the grey tail with a black terminal band.

II-4. Plumage of females

As with males, the wing formula (long P10) and the colour of the claws can be used to distinguish females from those of the Common Kestrel. Furthermore, in the adult female Lesser Kestrel, the black markings on the back, scapulars and lesser and median coverts are shaped like fine, open chevrons (photos 36 & 38), whilst those of the female Common Kestrel are much thicker and distinctly triangular (photos 37 & 39).



36. Lesser Kestrel, female, Spain, May 2024 (© Kevin Hughes).
The upper edge of the (thin) black markings is slightly concave.



37. Common Kestrel, female, Spain, May 2024 (© Eugenio Collado).
The upper edge of the (thick) black markings is straight.



38. Lesser Kestrel, female, Spain, April 2017 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez).
The black markings on the upperparts are shaped like an open chevron.



39. Common Kestrel, female, Spain, April 2017 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez).
The black markings on the upperparts are distinctly triangular.

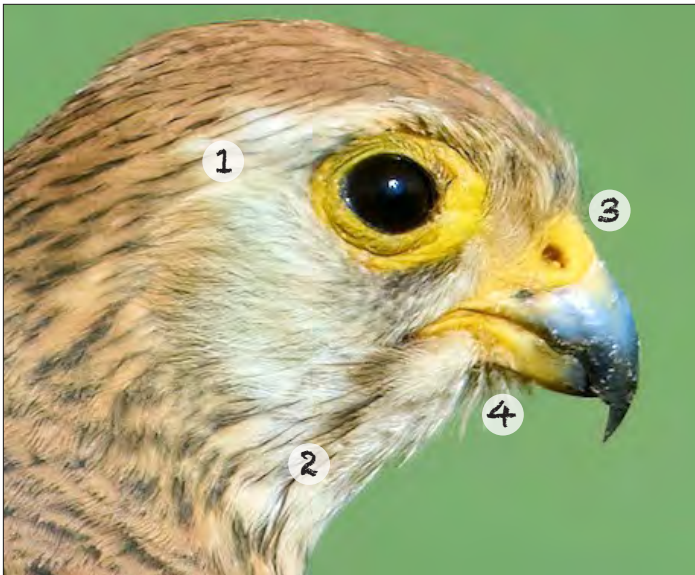
Relatively obvious in perched birds, the **head pattern** of the female Lesser Kestrel (photos 42, 44 & 46) differ quite distinctly from that of the female Common Kestrel (photos 43, 45 & 47): 1° there is in fact no dark eye-stripe line behind the eye; 2° the black moustache is less pronounced and less visible; 3° the streaks on the crown are finer and more diffuse, and the ear-coverts appear paler, almost whitish, bearing at most very faint grey streaks (Corso 2000). Furthermore, the **yellow cere** of the bill is more developed in the Lesser Kestrel, and therefore more conspicuous, as is the area of bare yellow skin around the eye (which forms only a thin yellow orbital ring in the Common Kestrel). As the **base of the lower mandible** is also yellow in the Lesser Kestrel, this colour appears to extend as far as the grey-black of the bill, whereas the yellow cere is much smaller and barely visible in the Kestrel, whose bill base is, moreover, grey-blue, not yellow.



40. Lesser Kestrel, female, Spain, April 2025 (© Alfonso Rodrigo).
Even when they are thicker, the black markings have a concave upper edge.



41. Common Kestrel, female, England, December 2022 (© Peter Kennerley).
Some individuals have a slightly concave upper edge, but the plumage is less russet.



42. Lesser Kestrel, female, Spain, May 2024 (© Kevin Hughes).
Note the lack of a black eye-stripe (1), the fine and barely visible moustache (2), the very extensive bright yellow cere (3) and the largely yellow lower mandible (4).



43 Common Kestrel, female, Spain, May 2024 (© Eugenio Collado).
Note the distinct black eye-stripe (1), the thick, well-defined moustache (2), the poorly developed pale yellow cere (3) and the bluish-grey lower mandible (4).



44. Lesser Kestrel, female, Spain, April 2025 (© Alfonso Rodrigo).
Note the whitish, almost unstreaked ear-coverts, the indistinct moustache and the very prominent yellow around the eye and the base of the bill.



45. Common Kestrel, female, Czech Republic, December 2023 (© Honza Grünwald).
Note the finely black-streaked ear-coverts, the very pronounced black moustache and the yellow limited to a thin orbital ring and the cere of the bill.



46. Lesser Kestrel, female, Spain, March 2024 (© Manuel García Ruiz).
The reddish-brown of the upperparts and the cream of the underparts predominate over the black markings.



47. Common Kestrel, female, Czech Republic, December 2023 (© Honza Grünwald).
The black markings are very prominent, both on the underside and the upperparts.

When in flight, it is more difficult to distinguish between female Lesser Kestrel and female Common Kestrel. Indeed, the criteria described above (markings on the upperparts and facial pattern) are only useful under good observation conditions and, above all, for identifying perched birds. The more compact silhouette and the more rounded shape of the wing tips of the Lesser Kestrel (with the long P10) remain useful for identifying a bird in flight. Viewed from above, the grey **uppertail coverts** of the female Lesser Kestrel stand out against the brown plumage (photos 48, 50 & 52) and are therefore a good identification feature because, in the female Common Kestrel, these feathers are reddish-brown with distinct black barring, like the rest of the upperparts and tail (photos 49 & 51). Some female (particularly very old) Common Kestrels may have grey-tinged uppertail coverts (photo 53), but these are always distinctly barred with black, whereas they appear almost plain grey (with a few indistinct dark grey bars) in the Lesser Kestrel.



48. Lesser Kestrel, female, Spain, March 2025 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez).
Note the grey uppertail coverts, which stand out against the reddish-brown plumage.



49. Common Kestrel, female, Germany, September 2021 (© Ulrike Wizisk).
The uppertail coverts are the same reddish-brown with black barring as the upperparts and tail.



50. Lesser Kestrel, female, France, April 2024 (© Yann Muzika).
The wing may appear pointed when outstretched, but the long P10 is visible on the left.



51. Common Kestrel, female, Spain, October 2023 (© Alejandro Sanz).
Depending on the position of the wing, P10 may appear long (here on the left wing, but not on the right).



52. Lesser Kestrel, female, Spain, April 2024 (© Miguel Rouco).
Note the almost plain grey uppertail coverts and the partially greyish outer tail feathers.



53. Common Kestrel, female, Spain, February 2023 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez).
This female has grey uppertail coverts, but they are distinctly barred with black.

Viewed from below, it can be even more difficult to distinguish the females of the two species, as their plumage is so similar. However, in the Lesser Kestrel, the faintly barred **flight feathers** give the rear part of the wing a paler hue that contrasts with the underwing coverts mottled with black (photos 54 & 56), whilst the wing is more uniformly mottled/barred with black in the female Common Kestrel (photos 55 & 57).



54. Lesser Kestrel, female, Spain, May 2023 (© A. Galache).
Note the unstreaked blackish tip of the outer primary feathers and the long P10.



55. Common Kestrel, female, Spain, March 2026 (© Manuel Fernandez-Bermejo).
Note that P10 is as short as P7 and that the outer primaries are barred almost to the tip.



56. Lesser Kestrel, female, Spain, March 2024 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez).
The white (unstreaked) bases of the flight feathers contrast with the black-spotted coverts.



57. Common Kestrel, female, England, July 2019 (© James Kennerley).
Note the fully barred flight feathers, giving the wing a uniform black mottled appearance.

II-5. Plumage of juveniles

Juveniles of both species can be distinguished from adult females by their entirely new plumage and the thick cream-coloured edging adorning the tips of the **primary coverts**. This small cluster of feathers, visible both on a perched bird and in flight (in the photograph), also provides a valuable criterion for distinguishing a juvenile Lesser Kestrel (photo 58) from a Common Kestrel of the same age (photo 59). The former has uniformly black primary coverts (at most a single row of spots on the outermost feathers in juvenile females), whereas the latter's primary coverts bear brown spots, particularly in juvenile females (1–3 rows of spots); this characteristic is more variable in juvenile males (0–2 rows of spots). However, care must be taken to ensure the bird's age has been correctly determined beforehand, as adult female Lesser Kestrels have a few spots on the inner (2 rows) and outer (1 row) primary coverts, but these feathers do not have a cream-coloured edge at the tip, a characteristic specific to juvenile birds (Ollé *et al.* 2020).



58. Lesser Kestrel, juvenile, Spain, July 2024 (© Zbigniew Kajzer).
Note the plain black primary coverts, with just a thick cream-coloured margin, typical of juveniles.

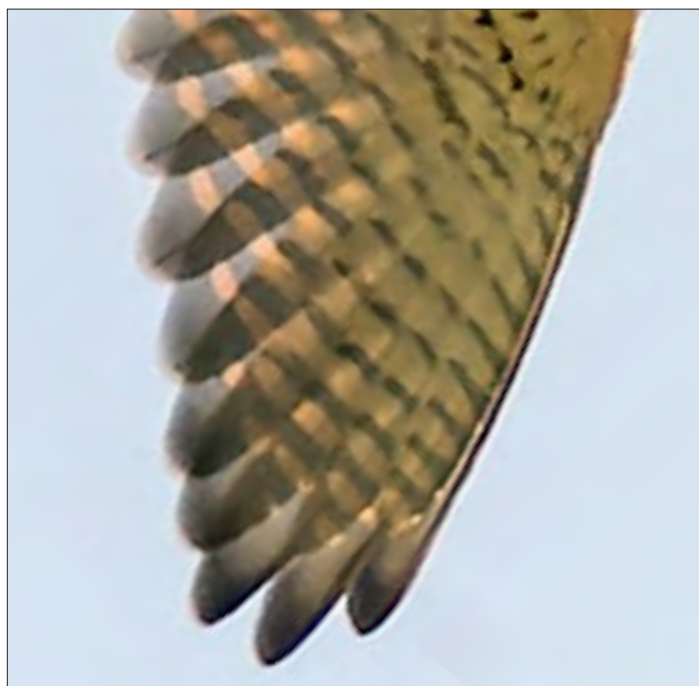


59. Common Kestrel, juvenile, Spain, July 2021 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez).
The primary coverts are distinctly mottled with reddish-brown (here, three rows of spots).

In juvenile Lesser Kestrel, the **outer primaries** are not barred at the tip and their base appear paler than the underwing coverts. They form a broad, dark, diffuse tip at the end of the wing (photo 60), whilst they are always barred almost to the tip in Common Kestrel of the same age (photo 61). In the latter, the dark tips of the primaries are therefore shorter, blacker and more sharply defined, forming a distinct dark line along the trailing edge of the wing, the wing itself being uniformly mottled with dark (Forsman 2017). Furthermore, the tail of Common Kestrel appears slightly longer, though this characteristic requires direct comparison.



60. Lesser Kestrel, juvenile, Spain, July 2024 (© Zbigniew Kajzer).
Note the extensive black patch at the tips of the primary feathers, which are not barred at the tip.



61. Kestrel, juvenile, England, July 2023 (© James Kennerley).
Note the bars extending almost to the tip of flight feathers, with limited black in this part.



62. Juvenile Lesser Kestrels with a juvenile Common Kestrel (third bird from the left), Spain, September 2024 (© Miguel Rouco).
Note the absence of a black eye-stripe, the pale claws and the faint moustache of the young Lesser Kestrels, as well as their smaller size compared to the Common Kestrel.

The head, which appears rounder and is often more tucked into the shoulders than in the Common Kestrel, together with the shorter legs, gives the perched Lesser Kestrel a more 'compact' appearance (Christian Riols *in litt.*). Moreover, juveniles (especially males) generally have a more 'sand-coloured' back, less reddish than that of young Common Kestrel, and in the juvenile male, the head is quite often already greyish, particularly at the nape, which produces a two-tone appearance different from that of the Common Kestrel (Christian Riols *in litt.*). Finally, the **head pattern**, as in the adult female (see II-4), include distinctive features, namely pale, unstreaked ear-coverts, a faint moustache (female) or even indistinct one (male), and the absence of a dark eye-stripe (photo 62). Furthermore, the **pale claws** (see II-2) and, in flight, the **P10 being longer than the P7** (see II-1) are valuable criteria for identifying juveniles.

II-6. Vocalizations

Lesser Kestrels are extremely vocal within breeding colonies and relatively silent outside them, but have typical contact calls when hunting in groups. They have several different types of call, one of which (sound 1) broadly resembles one of the Common Kestrel's calls, whilst the other (sound 2) is very distinct and characteristic of the species, making it immediately recognisable. Juveniles produce only the first call, whilst adults use either call interchangeably, with the second being the most common within colonies. Sounds 3 and 4 below illustrate the typical calls of the Common Kestrel.

Sound 1 – Lesser Kestrel, Aragón, Spain, April 2017, José Carlos Sires (XC388648 – <https://xeno-canto.org/388648>)

Sound 2 – Lesser Kestrel, Castile and León, Spain, May 2025, João Ferreira Tomás (XC994311 – <https://xeno-canto.org/994311>)

Sound 3 – Lesser Kestrel, Bavaria, Germany, October 2014, Beatrix Saadi-Varchmin (XC1049540 – <https://xeno-canto.org/1049540>)

Sound 4 – Kestrel, Catalonia, Spain, January 2026, Pere Josa (XC1076829 – <https://xeno-canto.org/1076829>)

III – In conclusion

The main criteria on which the identification of a Lesser Kestrel can be based, regardless of sex or age, are essentially the *wing formula*, with P10 much longer than P7 and almost as long as P8, and the *colour of the claws* (horn or ivory). For birds in female plumage (juveniles and females), one can also consider the *head pattern*, notably the absence of a black eye-stripe, the faint moustache and the prominence of yellow at the base of the bill, as well as the faintly barred flight feathers. *Vocalizations* are only useful in the case of adults, which have a specific call (not produced by juveniles). Of course, most of these criteria are best observed in photographs or on birds perched at close range, but they certainly enable one to distinguish the species from a Common Kestrel.

And with experience, one eventually learns to recognise the differences in body structure (a more compact silhouette, a proportionally shorter tail and a more rounded wing tip) and the distinct flight pattern of the former compared with the latter. I have not included the often-cited feature of the black colour on the central pair of tail feathers, which is more prominent in the Lesser Kestrel (in all plumages), as it is not always visible and may appear in some Common Kestrel undergoing active moulting.

I shall conclude with a few annotated photographs (photos 63 to 68) and by drawing birdwatchers' attention to the possibility (albeit highly hypothetical...) of an eastern male (*pekinensis* or intermediate) arriving in France in the autumn; a careful examination of the extent of the grey on the upperwing coverts should then make it possible to identify him.



63. Lesser Kestrel, second-year male, Spain, April 2025 (© Andrés Rojas Sánchez).
Note the back and the median and lesser coverts, which are free of black spots.



64. Common Kestrel, adult male, France, January 2024 (© Alexis Lours).
Note the upperparts and underparts, which are heavily mottled with black.



65. Lesser Kestrel, adult female, Spain, May 2023 (© Kevin Hughes).
Note the whitish flight feathers contrasting with the black-spotted underwing coverts.



66. Common Kestrel, adult female, Netherlands, May 2026 (© Wouter Van Gasse).
Note the underside of the wing, which is uniformly barred (flight feathers) and spotted (coverts) with black.



67. Lesser Kestrel, juvenile male, Aude, September 2022 (© Romain Riols).
The tail resembles that of the adult male, but with additional fine bars.



68. Common Kestrel, female, Czech Republic, March 2024 (© Honza Grünwald).
Note the black eye-stripe, the distinct moustache, the barred flight feathers and the black claws.



69. Lesser Kestrel, adult male, India, December 2021 (© Sunil Kini). Note the blue-grey colour extending to almost all of the upperwing coverts of this Asian individual (see I-6).

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