

## The Lesser Kestrel

The Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* is a small (ca. 150 gram) falcon. It has a slender build and long, pointed wings. The adult male is distinguished by his blue-grey head, rump and wings (greater upperwing coverts). The female is pale, rufous and has a reddish brown head, with black barring on the upperparts and streaking below. The juveniles are similar in appearance to the adult females.



The adult and juvenile plumages of male and female Lesser Kestrels (from Kemp & Kemp 1998).

The Lesser Kestrel breeds in Europe, but spends the southern winter in southern Africa and especially the semi-arid grasslands and Karoo regions (i.e. the central regions of South Africa). These kestrels usually occur in flocks and feed and roost communally. Many thousands of birds congregate at some roost sites and these aggregations (of up to thousands of individuals) are truly one of the spectacles of the raptor world.

The Lesser Kestrel hunts from low perches (such as bushes, fences or telephone poles) or by soaring and hovering. In South Africa it feeds on mainly insects, but will also take spiders and small vertebrates.

## A threatened species

The world population of Lesser Kestrels is probably in the region of 80,000 – 100,000

individuals. Approximately 50,000-60,000 of these birds spend the southern summer in South Africa. The global Lesser Kestrel population has declined during the past few decades and as a result this species is listed in global and national red data books. It is included as "vulnerable" in *The Eskom Red Data Book of Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland* (Barnes 2000). There are many reasons for its present precarious status, including: habitat transformation in Europe and Asia, destruction of the sweet grassland habitat in South Africa, afforestation, locust-control poisons, human persecution, and destruction of roost sites. Natural mortality factors include the death of large numbers of birds during hailstorms and possibly periodic times of low food supply (especially during years of drought).

## Hailstorm causes havoc

On 2 March 1994 a violent hailstorm swept through De Aar. Although the storm only lasted a few minutes, and 33 mm of rain was measured, the 25 mm hailstones left a wake of destruction. There was extensive damage to vehicles and homes, but birds suffered too. The roosting colony of Lesser Kestrels fell directly in the path of the storm and an estimated 10% of the 6000-8000 birds were either killed or injured! Hundreds of dead and dying birds lay below the blue-gum, pine and

pepper trees. A team of helpers was called in to collect the carcasses and catch the injured birds. The 336 injured birds were given emergency treatment. Many of the kestrels were released in De Aar during the following three days, but 115 were transferred to the Animal Rehabilitation Centre in Pretoria and after a treatment and recovery period were released. The injuries included broken legs and wings, as well as damaged eyes. Because of the severity of their injuries, 17 were euthanased. The 357 dead kestrels were collected and their skins were later deposited in the collections of the McGregor Museum in Kimberley and National Museum in Bloemfontein.

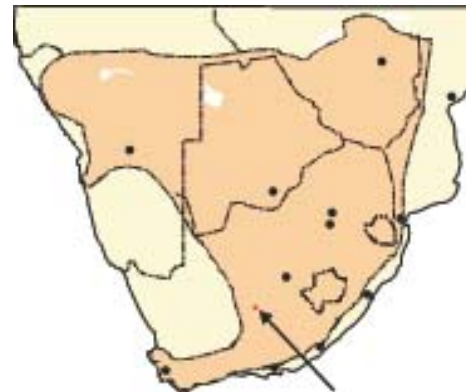
- From: Taljaard, F.D. & Anderson, M.D. 1994. *Violent hailstorm kills 357 Lesser Kestrels*. Gabar 9: 28-29.

## De Aar's Lesser Kestrels

De Aar, situated in the eastern Karoo (Northern Cape Province, South Africa), has one of the largest roosting populations of Lesser Kestrels in South Africa. During the day these birds forage on insects, spiders and small vertebrates in the Karoo veldt surrounding De Aar. At night they fly to the city, where they roost in blue-gum trees, pine trees and on utility structures. De Aar is probably the best place in South Africa (and even the world) to see large aggregations of these kestrels. A few Eastern Red-footed Kestrels (Amur Falcon) sometimes join the Lesser Kestrels at their roost sites.

## When and where to see Lesser Kestrels in De Aar

Lesser Kestrels generally arrive in De Aar during late-October and early-November.



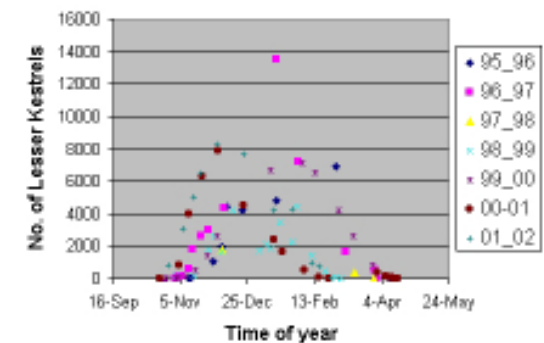
The range of the Lesser Kestrel in southern Africa. The arrow points to the position of De Aar, in the Northern Cape Province, South Africa (from Sinclair & Hockey 1996).

The numbers vary and depend on food availability in the eastern Karoo. Numbers peak during December and January, with approximately 13,500 birds being recorded in the city on 15 January 1997. This is more than 10% of the species' global population! The kestrels depart on their northerly migration during late-March and early-April. Therefore, late-November to late-February is probably the best time to see large numbers of kestrels in De Aar.

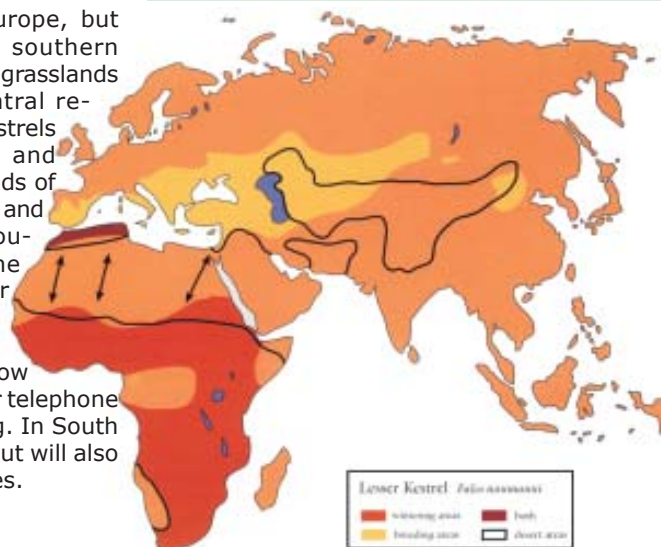
The kestrels usually return to their roost sites at sunset, and this is arguably the best time to see and photograph the incredible clouds of birds. By dusk they have settled down, with only the odd straggler flying in and out of the roost. The kestrels then depart for their foraging grounds before sunrise, and during mid-summer this may be before 04h30!

The main roosting sites in De Aar are at the Hospital (Visser Street) and Railway Station (Sinjaal Street). There is no restriction on access to these sites.

Roosting kestrels are also found in other Karoo towns, including Philipstown, Colesberg, Hanover, Victoria West, Strydenburg and Britstown. There is also a nice roost opposite the police station in Galeshewe, Kimberley, where up to 4000 Lesser Kestrels and the two red-footed kestrels can be observed.



The number of Lesser Kestrels counted at the roost sites in De Aar during seven summers (from 1995-2002). The kestrels are generally present in De Aar from late-October to early-April, although the large flocks are usually recorded from December to February.



The distribution of the Lesser Kestrel, indicating the breeding and non-breeding areas (from McCann 1994).

## Ringling; an attempt to understand the mysteries of migration

During the past few years, Francois Taljaard and John Moorcroft have been catching and ringing Lesser Kestrels in the eastern Karoo. The birds are either caught in the field using a Bal-Chatrri or at the roost using mist-nets. Each caught kestrel is weighed, measured, ringed and then released. They are ringed with a metal ring which is inscribed with an unique number and a message which says "Inform SAFRING University Cape Town". If the bird is ever recaptured or found dead or injured, its ringing locality, date of ringing, and other information can be determined. This provides valuable information, including the longevity of the individual, migration route, and fidelity to roost/feeding sites.

Recoveries of marked birds should be reported to SAFRING at the University of Cape Town (Tel. 021 – 6502421/2) or Francois Taljaard (see contact details below).

### De Aar kestrel found in Saudi Arabia

A registered envelope bearing the gold-embossed coat of arms of HRH Prince Abdullah Bin Mansour Bin Jalawi of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia arrived at SAFRING on 11 November 1997. It contained a letter and a flattened bird ring that heralded one of the most exciting recoveries in recent years.

The ring had been placed on a Lesser Kestrel in De Aar in March 1994 by Francois Taljaard. During a hailstorm (see above) he captured, ringed and rehabilitated 48 birds. The first of these, an adult male with ring 5-88252, was the bird recovered by Prince Abdullah Bin Jalawi. According to his letter it was found 150 km from Jeddah, which is 6021 km from De Aar.

There have been two previous recoveries of ringed Lesser Kestrels in southern Africa, both bearing Russian rings, one having been ringed in the Stavrotol region and the other in the Chokpak Pass in Khazachstan. The Saudi Arabian record is the first recovery of a Lesser Kestrel with a South African ring. It was found directly on the Great Circle route from South Africa to the Khazachstan-Turkmenistan region where large numbers of Lesser Kestrels are known to breed. Very little is known of the origins of the birds visiting southern Africa and this ring recovery yields the first information on the migration route taken by Lesser Kestrels visiting South Africa.

- From Africa Birds & Birding 1997, Vol. 2 No. 6, page 16.

## Conservation of the Lesser Kestrel

The key to the continued survival of the Lesser Kestrel lies primarily in implementing effective conservation measures in its Palearctic breeding grounds (i.e. in Europe and Asia). In South Africa we can contribute to its conservation by conserving the highly threatened grassland biome, using bird-friendly locust-control chemicals, and protecting the roost-sites (i.e. not chopping down trees and preventing disturbance at night).

### Further information

For further information about Lesser Kestrels and the population in the Karoo (and De Aar in particular), please contact Francois Taljaard, coordinator of the Platberg-Karoo Raptor Project, or Mark Anderson, ornithologist, Northern Cape Department of Agriculture, Land Reform, Environment & Conservation:

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## One of the wonders of the Karoo



A collaborative project of the Raptor Conservation Group's Platberg-Karoo Raptor Project, Emthanjeni Municipality, and Northern Cape Department of Agriculture, Land Reform, Environment & Conservation



De Aar 100 Years

