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FREE RESOURCE: FACTS ABOUT FALCONS

It's time to learn about falcons! Use this fun fact sheet to find out all about these super fast predators. Look out for words in **bold** text and find out what they mean using the 'glossary' section. Finally, put your new knowledge to the test by answering the quiz questions at the end.

Introduction

There are over 40 species of falcons, which includes larger falcons, kestrels and caracaras. The largest falcon in the world is the Gyr (pronounced 'jir') Falcon, while the smallest is the Seychelles Kestrel.

Falcons are predators, which means that they catch and eat other animals, known as 'prey'. They have a number of amazing **adaptations** to help them hunt and survive in the wild, and can be found in many different **habitats** around the world.

The species of falcons native to the United Kingdom are the Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon, Hobby and Merlin.

Eyesight



Out of all of the birds of prey, falcons have the best eyesight, and this is how they find their prey. Most falcons will fly high up in the sky and then spot their prey from a distance, before dropping down towards it – see the 'Fast Flight' section below for more information about this.

Kestrels, like the American Kestrel in this photograph, use a slightly different technique to other falcons – they are

known for **hovering** in the sky, closer to the ground, as they look for their prey. In the photograph you can see that the kestrel has long, pointed wings and a long tail. This helps them to hover, as they can flap their wings very quickly and fan out their long, wide tail, to stop them from moving forward. This allows them to stay in one position in the sky while looking down at the ground, searching for prey. This also makes them easy to identify – if you ever see a bird hovering by a roadside or an open field in the UK, you will know it is a kestrel!

Kestrels can not only see in full colour, in the same way that we can, but they can also see ultra-violet light, which means they can see some colours that we cannot see. This helps them to hunt as they mostly prey on small rodents, animals like mice and voles. Small rodents do not have a bladder, which means they cannot hold it when they want to go to the toilet. They just wee, all the time!



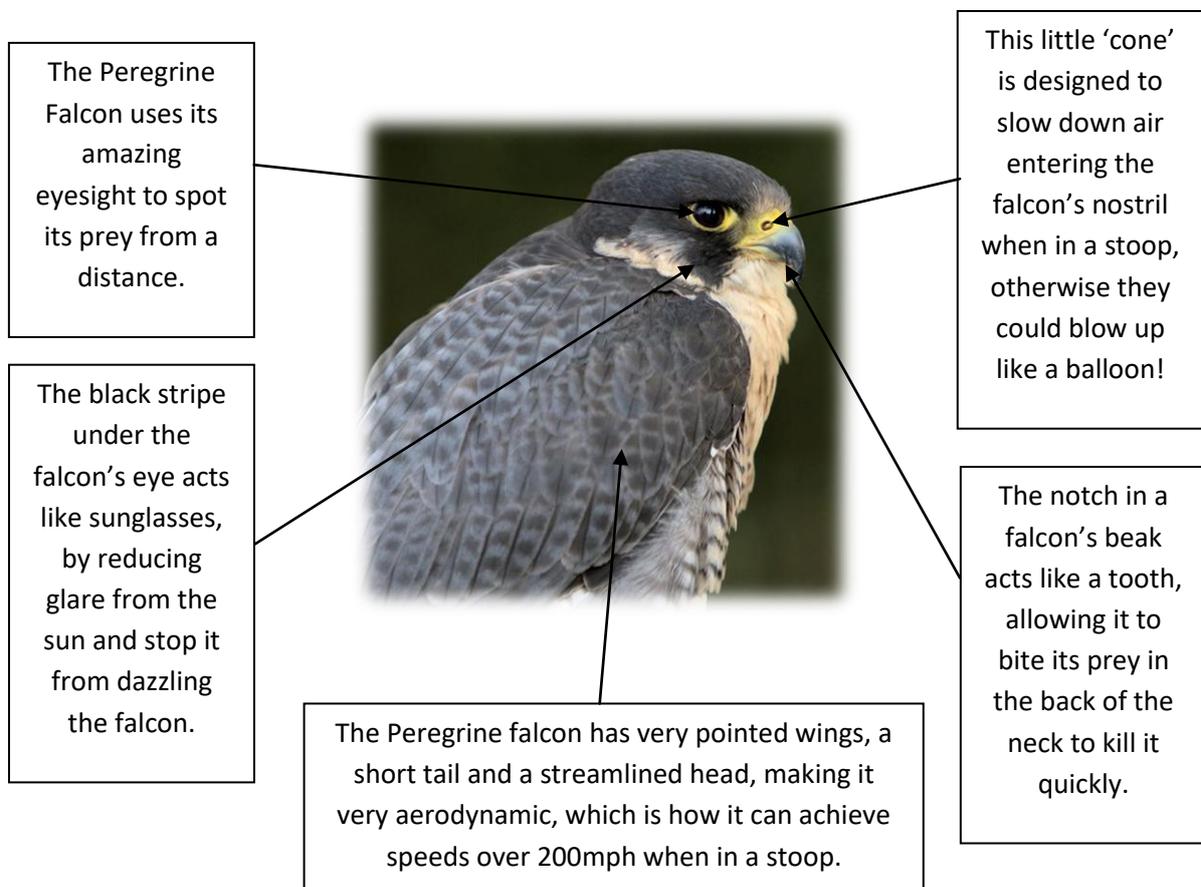
This wee, or urine, leaves a scent trail behind the rodent. Like most birds, kestrels do not have a sense of smell, but this urine trail also reflects ultra-violet light. So, even though we cannot see these trails, to the kestrel's eyes, the trail looks like it is glowing. The brighter the trail glows, the fresher it is, so the closer the kestrel is to the rodent that made the trail. They can then use their amazing eyesight to follow these trails and find their prey.

Kestrels, unlike most other birds of prey, are also **sexually dimorphic**. This is a scientific term which simply means that the males look different to the females, so it is easy to tell them apart. With most other falcons, the only way to tell is because the girls are usually bigger than the boys – sometimes up to a third larger and heavier, so we can guess if a falcon is male or female based on its size. With kestrels, it is a bit different, as the males have different feather markings. For example, this male Common Kestrel has a blue-grey head and tail; female Common Kestrels are brown all over, as you can see from the photo above. However, the babies are also brown and do not get their adult feathers until they are two years old, so it is not always so easy to tell them apart!



Fast Flight

The Peregrine Falcon is the fastest animal in the world. Larger falcons are bird-catching birds, so they do not catch animals on the ground like kestrels or other birds of prey. Instead, they catch birds that are flying; the falcon will fly up above their prey and, once they have chosen their target, they will go into a very sharp dive, known as a **stoop**, tucking their wings close to their body and building up speed. Peregrine Falcons have been known to achieve speeds of over 200 miles per hour when in a stoop!



Feet & Claws

Falcons have very strong feet and sharp claws that they use to catch their prey. However, unlike other birds of prey, they do not always 'grab' their prey to begin with. Because they fly up high and stoop down at their prey so fast, if they grabbed it, the shock of hitting their prey at speed could actually hurt the falcon's legs. Instead, they curl their feet into 'fists' and 'punch' their prey out of the sky as hard as they can. This usually kills their prey on impact, or stuns it and brings it to the ground where the falcon can grab hold of it and finish it off.

Once a falcon has got hold of its prey, they will grip very tightly to stop it from escaping. Having strong feet also helps them to hold on to perches when they are not flying.

Beak, Feeding & Pellets

Falcons have a hooked beak, like all birds of prey. They also have a notch in their beak which looks like a tooth, and they use this to bite their prey in the back of the neck to kill it quickly, before using their hooked beak and strong feet to tear up the meat and eat it. You can see the shape of a falcon's beak in this photograph of a young African Lanner Falcon.



When a falcon eats, the food does not go straight to their stomach in the way ours does when we eat – they have a storage pouch in their throat called a 'crop'. Once they have eaten, they then move their head and neck around to push the food from the crop into their stomach, where they then start to digest it. Once they have digested their meal, they will **regurgitate** a pellet. This pellet is made up of all the bones, fur, feathers and other bits of their prey that they cannot digest. Lots of people know that owls cough up pellets, but not many people realise it is something that all birds of prey will do.

Glossary

Adaptation	An 'adaptation' is a feature or process that an animal has to help it survive better in its environment. The process of adaptation takes place over many generations, which is also known as 'evolution'. When we talk about adaptation, we mean a 'feature' which helps the animal to survive.
Habitat	This is the name given to the environment an animal lives in out in the wild. There are lots of different habitats, such as woodlands, marsh land, grassland, etc – why not do some further research and see how much you can find out about different habitats?
Hovering	This is a hunting technique used by some birds to help them find their food, by flapping their wings in such a way that they can stay in one position in the air without moving forwards, so that they can keep their eyes fixed on their prey.
Regurgitate	To regurgitate means to cough something up; a bird of prey 'coughs up' a pellet from its stomach, getting rid of anything that it cannot digest. If you do an internet search for "owl puke" you can learn a lot more!
Sexually dimorphic / sexual dimorphism	This is a posh scientific way of saying that the males and females of the same species have different markings or characteristics which makes it easy to tell them apart. For example, some birds have different feather colours or patterns depending on whether they are a boy or a girl.
Stoop	The straight down dive that a falcon uses to attack its prey from high up in the sky.

FACTS ABOUT FALCONS: QUIZ

Test your new-found knowledge about falcons by answering the quiz questions below. When you are finished with the quiz, why not try and write a short story or a poem about a falcon using the facts you have learned, or perhaps draw a picture of one?

1	What are the largest and smallest species of falcon in the world?	
2	Which species of falcon are native to the UK?	
3	What is a falcon's best sense?	
4	What can kestrels see that humans cannot?	
5	How can you tell if a kestrel is a boy or a girl?	
6	How does a falcon find its prey?	

7	What is the fastest animal in the world, and how fast can it go?	
8	What is the special name given to a falcon's dive?	
9	What is the black stripe for under a falcon's eye?	
10	How does a falcon eat its prey?	
11	What is a 'habitat'? Bonus: do some online research; can you find out the habitat a kestrel lives in? And a Peregrine falcon?	
12	What is a pellet made out of?	