

10 July 2008

American Kestrel Nest Survey NYC - Issue #13

Kestrels are Fledging!!! – Part 4

The last of the young NYC kestrels are leaving the nest (fledging) for the 2008 nesting season – and so is this newsletter. We hope to be back in 2009, but who knows? If we find that a local pair or two are raising a second brood this year, we will try to send another issue in September. Otherwise, with any luck, look for information again in early spring 2009.

We were considering writing a season's summary for 2008 including number of NYC American Kestrel nests found; average nest height; number of young fledged, etc. Those are important data, but more appropriate for a scientific paper. Rather, what we have learned is this: New York City has the greatest number of nesting kestrels of any city in North America – yet we know very little about how NYC kestrels “make a living” and survive here. While bird watchers were heading off to city parks to look for nature, American Kestrels set up shop on city streets – right under our very noses. When did they first begin doing this in earnest? No one knows. Are their numbers increasing, decreasing? No one knows. What levels of mercury/lead do they have in their blood and fat stores? No one knows. Want to understand how city living affects living things? Hold that tiger! Kestrels are a most attractive bellwether of the urban environment...and like us, they live here year-round, catching most of their meals on city streets too. From a broader perspective, kestrels are extraordinary ambassadors of the local environment: To show a kid that falcons nest on his block is priceless.

With one week's delay in posting, we can provide info on what has happened at several kestrel nests, and report a few newly discovered ones as well. At the 111th street nest in Harlem, five young (all males) fledged on July 6-7. At the 75th street nest (just east of First Ave), we still have no idea what is happening, and are hoping for a report from Ben Cacace. Similarly, we visited the South Bronx nest in the Hunts Point section, and could not determine what (if anything) is happening there. At the 86th street and Central Park West site, there were four young that fledged; we could find three in late June. Meanwhile, we received reports of new nests in Chelsea (thanks Stuart Anthony and Sharron Crocker); one on the Lower East Side (Thanks Anthony Henderson); one on Canal and Green Streets (Thanks Eileen Jones!) and a nest on the Upper West Side (thanks Amy Solas). We were also told of



Just another ordinary adult female American Kestrel? Better look closely again at this lady who presides over the East 111th street nest (photographed by Deborah Allen on 6 July 2008). **There is something extremely significant about this kestrel...**it is the only such one we know of in all of NYC. We'll give a hint – what this kestrel has on her leg will make NYC raptor re-habbers, including Eileen Jones and Bobby Horvath, very happy. It indicates that this kestrel has been handled by people before...Determining the provenance of this bird will tell us much about the origin of some of NYC's kestrels. Is this a re-habbed bird? Were all local kestrels hatched in NYC, or are some recruited from a migratory population to nest in NYC? How long do they live? Reading the complete number of this band will answer these questions. (N.B. Deborah can read the first two numbers of the band: **14**, and it is a US Fish and Wildlife Metal Band). **Answer to this quiz is on page 12!** By the way, this female was watching over a newly fledged young male (see photo on page 3; four more had all fledged by Monday, 7 July). NYC constitutes a significant source population for northeastern kestrels.

a nest on west 48th street and 10th Avenue that we will investigate in spring 2009. (Our friend/colleague James O'Brien found a nesting pair at this location in 2006, but we could not locate anything in 2007.) In Brooklyn, David Rosenfeld, who teaches in Bensonhurst, reported a kestrel nest there. Another kestrel nest was on the decorative work of 631 11th street in Park Slope. That is seven new nests we have learned about just this week! Finally, re-habber Eileen Jones received a fledging American Kestrel from Quentin Road and 34th Street (Marine Park area in Brooklyn). Further information is provided below in the "Reports from the Field" section – there are several wonderful stories there.

How many American Kestrel nests are there in NYC? We believe somewhere between 100-150, with suitable nest sites (buildings with appropriate cavities) and House Sparrow density (food) being the two most important factors. We know of no kestrel nests in a city park in Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens or Brooklyn; for Staten Island we are hoping to hear from James Quadrino who placed nest boxes in SI parks several years ago – he would know. However, the point remains: NYC kestrels occasionally hunt in city parks, but they live on city streets – nesting in building cornices.

Below (p. 4) we also provide information about the keystone prey of the American Kestrel in NYC: the House Sparrow. Kestrels are not called "Sparrowhawks" without good reason. Until we began studying these falcons in NYC, little did we realize how closely the success of the falcon is related to the abundance of House Sparrows. Indeed it may be that nest site selection by kestrels is in large part determined by proximity and number of House Sparrows nearby.

This spring has been an extraordinary season of discovery about the kestrels of NYC: what we have learned so far will help re-write a few books about American Kestrel biology/ecology. We hope too that via this newsletter we have been able to get kestrel watchers throughout our area on the "same page," with many photos (search images) of what sorts of places kestrels like to nest. We have had extraordinary fun with people: from Rob Cicchetti and Chuck McAlexander who have been writing up their observations about their kestrel pairs in Manhattan; to James O'Brien who has been taking subways and busses around our town to track down yet another nest...to young Caroline Blacque who discovered kestrels for the first time this year. We have seen how NYC Kestrels are intricately connected to people. If we have been able to observe anything of significance, it is because we stand on the shoulders of giants. Our thanks to long-time kestrel researchers Dr. John Smallwood and Dr. David Bird who have spent their lives studying and writing about American Kestrels.

"I happen to like New York. I happen to like this place." Hope to be working with you again next year.



Juvenile (female) Eurasian Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) making one of its first flights in central Beijing, China. Sixteen kestrel species are found throughout the world, but only one species in the Americas. Kestrels frequently nest in cities on Asia, Europe and North America. Photos by Aihua Zheng, a post-doc (researching Dengue) at Einstein-Jacobi Medical Center in the Bronx.



Key to Photos: Top Left/Right – views north and south from 111th street nest; **Middle:** young male kestrel just out of 111th street nest (7 July) on Kitama Seeger Jackson's Fire Escape; **Bottom Left:** Band on Adult female at 111th street nest – note number **14**; **Bottom Right:** Three (of five) young – all males - in cornice nest at 111th street (6 July). Two were taken to Bob Horvath on 7 July, just after fledging.

House Sparrows

House Sparrows became established in NYC in 1854 when the Brooklyn Institute, hoping to limit canker worms (moth caterpillars), released several pairs inside Greenwood Cemetery. In less than a century, their descendants had spread coast to coast. Today, the House Sparrow is the most common bird found in NYC. It is the favorite food of the American Kestrel.

The half-page sketch of the English Sparrow House in Union Square Park appeared in the April 3, **1869** edition of Harper's Weekly: A Journal of Civilization (sic). Our friend **Phil Panaritis** sent the article and drawing to us:



It is accompanied by a little bit of text entitled, The Sparrow's Home :

"During the past few years our city and those immediately adjacent have been interested in the introduction of the English sparrow. In the parks of New York, and in the tree-lined avenues of Jersey City and Brooklyn, the superabundance of insects, and particularly the annoyance of worms hanging from the branches and continually dropping down upon passengers, became such burdensome nuisances that any means of relief was welcome. This relief was found in the sparrow. A few were imported, but they increased so rapidly that it is now becoming a question in some localities whether they are not likely to become a nuisance themselves. They certainly are preferable to the worms, and our city government has done well, we think, in encouraging the sparrows to take up their permanent abode with us by affording them such pleasant homes as that on Union Square Park, which we illustrate above.

DATE: Sunday, 7 May 2000
SUBJECT: American Kestrel Tale

hi all. you know those horizontal pieces of pipe at the top of the traffic light poles, the ones sparrows like to nest in and are popping in and out of all the time [see photo below]? over the weekend we saw a male kestrel clinging to the end of one such, at the corner of union and 8th ave in park slope, and literally trying to yank forth a meal for himself. in the end he left empty-clawed, but it was a dramatic spectacle, and smack in the middle of busy weekend pedestrian and wheeled traffic. **Susan Choi**



REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

From: Erica Mueller
Date: Jun 26, 2008 10:21 PM (and 1 July 2008)

Hi Dr. DeCandido,

I am just emailing to get more info on where I can read the American Kestrel newsletters for the populations that you monitor. I am a grad student at Montclair State University and am doing my thesis on American Kestrel vocalizations with Dr. John Smallwood, who has around 100 boxes up in northwest NJ. Since 2002 the kestrel populations we have been monitoring have been in sharp decline. In 2002 there were around 60 pairs and each year the population has gone down with an all time low this year of only 19 pairs. I am just curious to know if the population of kestrels that you are studying has been stable or declining as well, and also where your boxes are in NYC, in all the 5 boroughs? Any info you would be willing to share would be much appreciated!

And from an email from Dr Mueller on 1 July 2008...: "our [NJ] kestrels are about on the same timeline as the NYC ones - most of them have fledged already with only a few broods left close to fledging. Usually by July we rarely see any new nests. I don't believe any of them have double brooded. Once the season is over I can update if there's anything new."

Erica Mueller

From: Rob Cicchetti
Subject: Re: NYC Kestrel Newsletter #11
Date: Jun 15, 2008 10:35 PM

Hi Bob,

Looking at the various nest sites in NYC, we better hope that building managers or the city doesn't start "repairing" these buttresses and metal awnings; kestrels will have a tough time finding suitable nesting sites, since the modern buildings lack any such architectural crevices to nest in...

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From: Anthony Henderson
Subject: kestrel family
Date: Jul 1, 2008 1:15 PM

hi robert

just wanted to let you know about the kestrel family thats living outside my living room window. im not much of a bird expert, but my friend nicole from the audobon society helped me narrow it down. then i saw your "have you seen this bird?" site and there it was. just like you say in the description, they hang out on the antenna across the street and the nest is right above my window in the cornice of the building on stuyvesant st. in the east village. ive grown very obsessive about these beautiful birds. saw one a few minutes ago eating a small bird or mouse (couldnt make it out clearly, all i know is that it was dead and had legs!) then the bird flew its prey to the nest. very cool! they seem very healthy and very active. such a pleasure. here are some pix:



Entrance to the nest on Stuyvesant Street
photographed by Anthony Henderson in June 2008.
For those who have been reading this newsletter (and kestrels nesting around town), does this type of nest cavity – in a metal cornice of a building – look familiar? See below for some further observations by Rob Bate...looks like these kestrels are about to fledge soon, in the 4 July to 8 July time frame.
Building Cornices (and Modillions) are critical nesting habitat for kestrels in NYC.

From: Rob Bate
Subject: Kestrels downtown
Date: Jul 4, 2008 2:09 PM

Bob,

I saw the Kestrels on Stuyvesant St. The building is #40 and it has a sign over the front door advertising rentals. The cornice has 3 access holes and I saw a Kestrel at every hole and one hole had the back end of a bird in the opening which I assume is a young Kestrel. Is it possible that there may be several Kestrel nests? The bird(s) went completely in each hole though only one hole had another bird visible within.

Rob Bate

From: Donna
Subject: Newsletter on American Kestrel
Date: Jul 7, 2008 4:26 PM

"Can you please send me the newsletter. We have sighted 2 kestrels from our terrace on 10th street & 4th Ave." [Note Bene: these are most likely young and/or adults from the Stuyvesant Street nest.] "We live on the top floor of the building across the street from the Wannamaker building where we've also seen the birds perching. We first saw them about a week ago."

Donna
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From: Kimball Higgs
Subject: Kestrel sighting
Date: Jun 24, 2008 4:56 PM

HI,

We saw a Kestrel, pretty sure, landed on our balcony on w. 79th between West End and Riverside. This must have been last week, trying to remember what day exactly, but just about a week ago.

Our balcony has also played host in the past to a red tail hawk (overnight roost)!

Kimball
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From: Stuart Anthony
Subject: American Kestrels spotted in Chelsea
Date: Jun 24, 2008 3:19 PM

Hi all - I found your emails on the internet. We spotted 3 juvenile female American Kestrels at about 7pm on Sunday June 22 at the rooftop and penthouse terrace at 201 w 16th Street. They were sitting on a large metal trellis below which Will had found bird droppings over the last week. They stayed for about 1/2 hour flying back between various points: on our rooftop (201 w 16th): trellis, satellite dish, and interior of water tower; 200 west 16 - where they lighted on the water tower and rooftop parapet; and the water tower of the building immediately to our north. At the closest point we were about 8ft from one of them. Most definitely female and their very small size (about 8 inches) and kind of downy feathering makes me sure they are young.

On Monday June 23 at about the same time, we again saw one. Only one - again female - that alighted on 200 west 16 watertower for about 1/2 hour. Could not follow her when she flew off.

Last summer on a couple occasions we saw what looked like a falcon-silhouetted bird entering and leaving the roof parapet of the old New York Telephone building just west of 7th Ave, between 17th & 18th streets. We were never able to make a positive i.d.

Hope this helps. It was very exciting. We will keep you up to date on sightings.

Thanks. Keep up the good work.

Stuart
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From: Sharron Crocker
Subject: Fw: Kestrels this morning
Date: Jun 27, 2008 2:40 PM

"... just wanted to send you the below info ... I first saw them Monday, not knowing they were such an item. There was one on our railing which flew off when I got there and then there were two on top of one water tower ... one appeared to be feeding the other ... there are at least two males and one female hanging around our building ... I saw the male fly to the NY telephone building and around to the other side several times, one time another bird joined him ... don't know what happens when they get on the north side!"

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From: Sharron Crocker
Sent: Jun 27, 2008 10:11 AM
Subject: Kestrels this morning

If you want to get a good look at the kestrels -- go up in the morning when they are most active ... I was up there around 9:00 am and they were flying back and forth past our building, landing on a balcony of the building across 16th street and going to the water towers where we saw them yesterday, all the while making their high-pitched sound ... I saw two males and a female at the same time so there are at least three of them in the neighborhood. One pair flew to another building further away and one male stayed on the water tower. Two mockingbirds on the building across 7th avenue were very agitated and the male flew twice at the kestrel trying to bully it off its perch -- it didn't succeed! What fun to be bird watching in chelsea!

Sharron

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From: Carol Wood
Subject: 69th Street Kestrels
Date: Jun 26, 2008 11:56 PM

Hi Bob & Deborah,

I keep looking for the kestrels from my apartment, and haven't been seeing any of them on the ledges of Rob's building. That used to be a favorite place for perching, but not anymore. Bob, remember when we saw one of the fledglings try to land on the tree on the brick building to the north? Well, I now see one of the kestrels in that tree on a daily basis. I was beginning to wonder if it was always the same bird, but it was impossible to tell. This evening I went up to the terrace around 6:00 and stayed for about half an hour. When I first got there, I saw a male on the antenna on top of the building to the south of the nest building, and a female on the railing of a building to the north. As I watched one, the other would disappear and turn up somewhere else. Eventually a male flew in and landed on the corner of the skylight roof. I think this was one of the fledglings, but I couldn't see the color of the legs (a tip from Deborah.) The really exciting thing, though, was that I then saw a female fly in and circle above our roof terrace right over my head. She landed on the antenna on my building, not far from where I was standing. I believe this was the adult female. I then heard sounds which I suspect were made by the young male across the street. The female stayed on the antenna for a few minutes, and then flew to the terrace wall of my building by the fenced-in area. She had yellow legs, black talons, and black tip of the bill. We watched each other for several minutes, and she seemed as curious about me as I was about her. I'm a bad judge of distance, but I'd guess she was probably only 30 or 40 feet away from me. The female finally took off, and flew north, at which point I saw a female in that tree again. There was some movement of that bird and a second female from one perch to another, and they both wound up

on the same branch of that tree, very close together. After a while the male took off and landed between the two females in the tree, with probably an inch or two separating him from the female on either side. Pretty neat.

Carol

From: Eileen Jones <vzeus9ad@verizon.net>

Subject: 2 more girls

Date: Jul 7, 2008 7:36 PM

Do you know about a nest at Canal & Green? It fledged at least two females today (7 July 2008), but a worker who lives in Brooklyn brought them home. I've got them now.

Eileen Jones - Wildlife Re-Habber - 718-853-9290

From: Amy Solas

Subject: American Kestrel sighting

Date: Jul 4, 2008 11:02 AM

This young American Kestrel was on my block, **75th St. between Columbus and Amsterdam Aves.**, on the morning of June 17. It was standing in front of my brownstone. Then it walked into the street. Scared by a passing car, it hid under a parked SUV, which is where it was when I took these photos. I contacted a hawk blogger who told me that it was likely a young bird that hadn't gotten the hang of flying. I'm told that they're all over my neighborhood (which I'm sure you know).

I think that the nest is in scaffolding on 75th and Amsterdam, above Pour and Crumbs. That same morning, I noticed some bird activity up there. The birds looked large and the color was similar to what I saw.

Amy



Just fledged American Kestrel (female – note brown wings) photographed by Amy Solas on 17 June 2008 on 75th street just west of Columbus Avenue. Note the absence of down on the head indicating that this bird could fly reasonably well. If you find a fledged kestrel with much down (white feathers) on the head and especially the back/wings – that one needs to be taken to a raptor re-habilitator. Alternately, any kestrel found on the ground should be taken to the roof of a tall building – see the discussion about “What to Do if You find a Young Kestrel on the Ground” excerpt in this issue.

From: Carly Vena
Subject: Re: Kestrels
Date: May 16, 2007

I saw the bird [American Kestrel] through the window from our reception area that looks out to the loading dock. It startled me and I knew something was wrong with it. I immediately closed the gate and called animal control. A few guys thought that chasing it out of the garage was a good idea and while I was calling, I saw the bird fly right into the side of a passing box truck. She fell to the street and walked to the other side. I went out and she got herself up onto the lighting truck parked across the street. She was just sitting very still in between the cab and the box of the truck, on the engine parts. (Photos 2 and 3). She hung out there until it was time for the lighting guy to move the truck. So he flipped the cab in order for us to get in there with a box. At this point, I still was waiting on animal control. She flapped her way out of our reach onto the top of a BAX Global truck. I called again and got a useless answer from someone on the other end who assured me that animal control will not help with a bird they will just take it off of your hands and "take care of it". Not liking the answer I got, I called the Audubon Society and was told to NOT give the bird over to Animal Control. They gave me information on where I could take her and I called the place, Animal General and spoke to a lovely veterinarian named Rita. She asked me to bring her to Animal General; she could not send someone for her. So I went back out and she was now on a UPS truck and the driver was in it. That truck was leaving and she fluttered off awkwardly right into a window. She hit hard and slid right down onto the window sill. So she stayed.

I called my friend Tommy and he came over with the box. He and I got her into the box and I went back to my office to prepare to go to Animal General. I told the receptionist that if Animal Control came by, to tell them that the bird flew away.

So as I stepped out of the office with the bird in a box, Animal Control pulled up so I quick went back inside. I was going to wait for him to leave but he was taking too long just sitting out there. I noticed there was a camera crew on the truck. I figured that these people --whoever they are-- wouldn't let this guy take the bird off to sure death. So I introduced myself to the animal control officer, Eli. I told him that I had the bird and he could not have it. I showed him the computer printout of the animal hospital information and I told him that I was bringing her there. He asked me to give him the bird that I was not equipped to handle her. I said no, I will not be handing the bird over. I found out the camera crew was from a Canadian television show that followed regular people around at their jobs. I guess it's a reality show. They of course were my leverage. I mean, the animal control officer wouldn't want to look like a bad guy on TV, right? He called someone on his radio and reluctantly let me take her. The camera crew followed me into the garage to get a shot of the bird. They got their footage and I put the lucky little bird into a cab and took her to see Rita. Rita gave her a once over, gave her some water and told me that she would take the bird home with her for the night and the next day, she would go to Raptor Trust in NJ for rehabilitation.

So there are the events of Wednesday, May 16, 2007. I want to thank you Chuck [McAlexander], for giving me all of this information about our coolest neighbors. She really is a special little bird, and I am really glad to know her.

Carly Vena

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What to Do if You Find a Young Kestrel on the Ground?

From late May through mid-July when young kestrels make their first flights they are very (very) vulnerable. They often end up on the ground (street) where their parents cannot bring them food or defend them from problems such as moving vehicles, cats, etc. Note here that a kestrel on the ground of a rooftop is in a good place...and that is what our goal will be to get a street level kestrel to a rooftop where the adults can bring the young falcon food and defend it from predators such as Crows and Blue Jays and even Robins.

So if you see a kestrel on the street that is being gawked at and surrounded by people, get yourself a coat or a large towel and calmly (slowly) approach the young bird. When you are within reach, toss the coat/towel over the kestrel...and then transport the package to a nearby rooftop. Obviously catching the young kestrel will not be easy, but it is doable. The most important thing to do is to transport the bird to a secure rooftop in the area where you found the bird. The parents will find it... (youngsters become very vocal when they are hungry). A good rooftop is one that is about 40-80 feet high and does not get any visitors (foot traffic). Alternately, a ledge or fire escape that faces the main street would be ok. If you want more advice, then give me a call (718-828-8262). Also, only call the NYC Parks Dept. or another conservation group as a last resort. They will likely come and take the bird away (and bring it to a re-hab facility). This is a good strategy if the parents have been killed or if the kestrel is injured...but when a young one is taken away, it is usually not released back into NYC, so we lose a future breeder in NYC. My opinion as a biologist is to keep young birds with their parents in the habitat where they were hatched...it is the only way we can hope to retain a breeding population of kestrels in NYC.

To contact local raptor rehabilitators if you find (or know of) a kestrel in trouble:

Robert Horvath - 516-293-0587 or BobbyH5800@verizon.net on Long Island (but takes many NYC raptors).

Eileen Jones - 718-853-9290 or EJ74@verizon.net in Brooklyn. Her raptors often end up with Robert Horvath since she does not have the necessary room for flight training/exercise.



Just fledged male kestrel at East 6th street
© Dino Sorbello 2006



Just fledged kestrel (female) on the ground,
West 75th street © Amy Solas 2008

What to do now?

Here is the answer to the quiz on Page 1:

From: ROBERT HORVATH <bobbyh5800@verizon.net>

Subject: kestrel band

Date: Jul 8, 2008 12:05 PM

Hi Bob,

In 2005 and 2006 I released approximately 40 hatch year kestrels in Manhattan (Central Park and Inwood Hill Park), the Bronx (Van Cortlandt Park) and Queens (Cunningham Park and Astoria Park) with bands starting with **1433** followed by a dash and five digits. I hope this might help. I can't even read the band when it is in my hand without a magnifying glass so I think it's great you were able to capture a partial band with that good a scope or camera. It's so small half the numbers wouldn't be visible unless the bird turned just right to see the whole band. Sorry you weren't able to meet us Sunday but we released 12 in Van Cortlandt Park with James and Adam. I released 12 more last month (June 2008) in Central Park on the upper west side. They were all banded with a new batch of bands that begin with 1623 then a dash and five digits. Parks Dept. called just this morning with a fledgling on 111th Street and St. Nicholas not banded but not too responsive, so Ill be getting it later hopefully. Ill let you know if anything else in that area comes in. **[See photos below of the two young males from the brood of five at 111th street]**

Bobby



Clockwise from top left: two young male kestrels that just fledged from the 111th street nest (Manhattan) in Robert Horvath's care on Long Island. One of the males is suffering from "frounce" ("Frounce is a highly contagious infection of the digestive tract; it is caused by a protozoan called *Trichomonas* which is frequently present in the crops of pigeons. For this reason, pigeon heads and crops are generally not fed to raptors.") For more info see:

<http://www.themodernapprentice.com/frounce.htm>).

All photos © Bobby Horvath 2008

Robert DeCandido PhD – rdcnyc@earthlink.net and 718-828-8262 (Bronx)

The Windhover

To Christ our Lord

by Gerard Manley Hopkins

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of; the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.



Male at 68th street and Broadway nest – 26 May 2008