

A Year in My Life with the American Kestrel

by Tom May



The author bands an adult kestrel.
Photo by Connie Burrous.

Working with kestrels is a year-round activity. Much of my time is observing, which includes many trips up and down a ladder. In the fall, I begin planning and construction. By November I am busy building new nest boxes to install in December. In the winter, for protection from the cold winds, kestrels will use old boxes for roosting. One spring I found

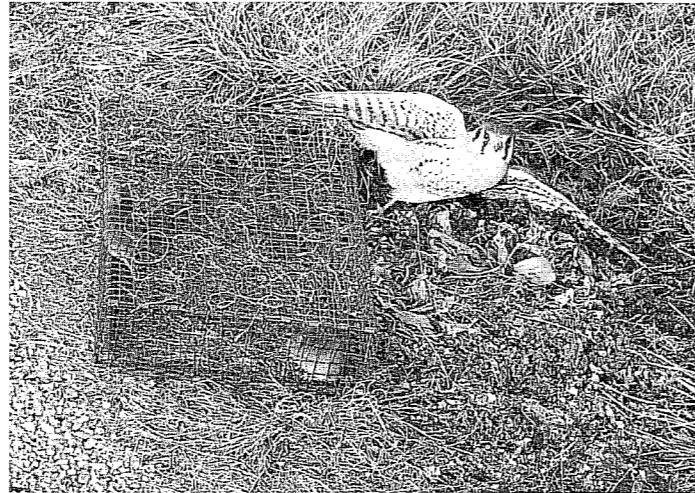
a box that had the floor covered with small pellets from one or two kestrels that used it all winter. My first nest boxes were made out of red oak and were unpainted. I no longer have a supply of red oak, so I have been buying pine boards and painting the boxes. They are approximately ten inches, by ten inches, by 19 inches tall. They have a flat roof on which it is easy to set things while I am working at the box. There is a three-inch opening in the front about ten inches off the floor. One side is cut so that the bottom third is attached to the house and the top two thirds is the door. This prevents eggs rolling out or young birds from escaping when the door is open. The boxes are sturdy and quite heavy. However, I have had to do very little in the way of repairs.

During the first two weeks of December, I go to all of my previously installed nest boxes and clean them of all old material and place new wood shavings about three inches deep in each one. This is also the time for needed repairs to be made. The new painted boxes are put up at this time so that the smell of paint is worn off of them by spring. To put up a new box, I use a fourteen-foot extension ladder and place the box as high as I can and still be able to work at the side where the door is located. First I go up the pole and put a nail in it, and then I hang the nest box on the nail. Next, I move the ladder to the other side of the pole and secure the box with baling wire at the top and bottom around the pole. My study area is about eighteen square miles and I have twenty boxes. I am slowly expanding the study area with more boxes.

January and February are waiting months, so it is a good time to road-trap adult kestrels for banding. I use a Bal-

chatri trap, which is a type of trap that has been used by the Chinese for centuries. The Chinese traps were a wicker basket with horsehair for snares. Mine is wire mesh (hardware cloth) with twenty-pound monofilament line for the snares. I use purchased mice inside the trap as a lure. Purchased mice have no sense of fear when a kestrel is on top of the trap and I have lost many mice when they stick their noses out to sniff the kestrel.

My first kestrel trapping experience was too good to be true. My wife was driving our van and we spotted a kestrel



Adult kestrel at trap.

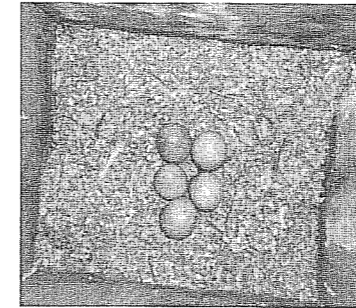
on a wire. As we drove by, the kestrel flew out over the field and I tossed the trap out on the side of the road. The kestrel turned and instead of coming back to the wire, like they normally do, it dove right for the trap and was snared before I could turn around and watch. They are not always that easy to catch. Although I have caught two at a time on one trap set, I have also sat along the side of a road for thirty minutes or more before either the kestrel or I gave up.

I take the middle seat out of my eight-passenger van and place a small table in that space to make a mobile banding station. Each bird that is trapped is first banded with a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service band, just in case it should escape. Then it is aged, sexed, weighed, and the wing chord measurement is taken before being released. I use asparagus cans with air holes in one end and open on the other to control the bird while it is not in hand. This whole process takes about seven minutes.

The first week in March I am back working with nest boxes.

I go to all the boxes and once again clean them out and add new shavings. Kestrels don't build nests, and most of the time they move the shavings out to the sides and lay the eggs right on the floor of the nest box. As I drive around the study area, I am watching for kestrels hanging out close to a box, and courtship displays, such as sitting close, or exchanging food, or actual mating taking place.

Tuesday is the day of the week that I have chosen to do all my work with kestrels. About the tenth of April I start inspecting every box with a camera. I have a digital camera, and when I modify the nest box hole just a little it will readily fit into the cavity. The modification is necessary because a rectangular camera does not fit well in a round opening. I bought the smallest camera I could in 2003, but now with the decreased size of most



Full clutch of eggs.

cameras, modification would not be necessary. The camera is mounted on a swimming pool cleaning pole and will extend out to reach all the boxes. I set the camera for a delayed exposure and have ten seconds to place the camera in the nest box. When I have visited all the nest boxes, I print an index print of all the pictures taken. Therefore, I have a pictorial log of all the nest boxes for that day.

Kestrel eggs are laid at a rate of one every other day and like most cavity nesters, kestrels do not start incubating until the whole clutch is laid. A normal clutch is five eggs, so that is the key to timing when the clutch is complete. Once hatching occurs, I will schedule banding of the young on the second Tuesday after they are first seen. The young grow very rapidly, gaining their adult weight in only sixteen to seventeen days. The young need to be at least ten days old in



Young kestrel being banded.

order to be able to sex them. The wing feathers will be coming out of the shafts by then, and their color can be used to identify the sex; males have blue feathers and females have brown ones. Some banders band at the nest box, but I bring the young down in a plastic shoebox that has metal hooks and attaches to the doorsill. I just feel better about not losing any bands while on a ladder fourteen feet up on a pole.

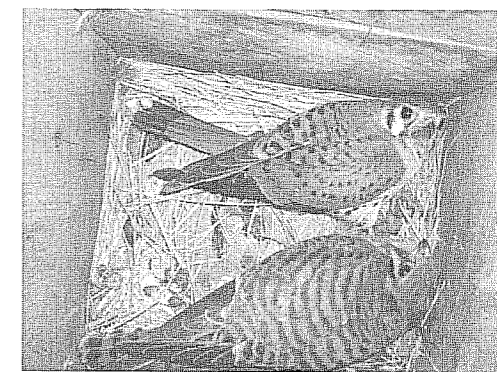
I have been bitten and had talons sunk into my fingers by adults when I am banding them. The parents are very vocal and stay close by while I am banding the young. They will even dive at me while I am working with the offspring. I have always managed to elude them. The young will be ready to fledge at twenty-nine to thirty-one days after hatching. There appears to be a relationship between where the nest box is located and how soon the young fly. If the box is located on a large power pole with double cross beams, the young may stay in and around the cross beams for a day or two before they actually fly. If the box is located on a smaller pole, they will fly a lot sooner. Either way, a close flock develops that persists until the young disperse. Because of efficient parental defense, there is usually a high survival rate for fledglings.

Although four years is too short of a time period to indicate a trend, I will say that 2007 was my best year. I had ten of eighteen potential boxes fledge kestrels. From those boxes I banded forty young birds. Considering my first year, when only one box fledged five young out of fourteen available boxes, 2007 looked very good. That one box was the only one that was on a power pole in a wide-open place. Now all boxes are placed on poles.

I started this project because, in 2002, West Nile Virus hit the bird population quite hard. Owls, crows, blue jays, and hawks were especially susceptible. I wondered if they would be able to make a

comeback in the next few seasons. To find out, I needed to be able to monitor one of these groups of birds. If I could find an increasing trend over the next few years, I would know they were on the way back.

I selected the American kestrel as the species I would monitor. First, they were known to be relatively plentiful in southwestern Illinois. Second, they are cavity nesters and



Adults in nest box. The female is significantly larger than the male.



would readily use nest boxes that I could watch. Third, they are distinctive and easily identified.

In the fall of 2002, I attended a five-day "Raptor Field Techniques Work Shop" at Stevens Point, WI, where I gained the basic training to work with raptors and do the kind of work needed for this project. In 2003, I applied for and received a sub-permit

Kestrel nestlings crowd the nest box.

to band American kestrels. My permit has now been expanded to band all hawks and owls in Illinois and I have branched out into some newer challenges. I am still keeping my first project going with the American kestrel in order to build the database that will answer my question about a recovery after the West Nile outbreak of 2002.



Tom May is a retired educator on the Board of Illinois Audubon Society, representing the Kaskaskia Valley Chapter. He enjoys banding kestrels and other birds of prey to add to our knowledge of them.



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CALENDAR OF UPCOMING EVENTS

July 5 through Sept. 6

Hummingbird Festivals. See complete list on page 7. For more information, contact the IAS office or Vern Kleen (217-787-3515 or kleen@comcast.net)

August 23

14th Annual Insect Awareness and Appreciation Day, War Bluff Valley Sanctuary. For more information, contact Terri Treacy at 618-683-2161 or territreacy@clearwave.com

September 18

Owl Prowl and Weiner Roast, Bremer Sanctuary. For more information, contact Vicki Hedrick at 217-854-2324 or vikij5@yahoo.com

September 19-21

111th Annual Meeting and Fall Gathering, Springfield. Come and help us dedicate our new headquarters/education center on Saturday, Sept. 20th. A full weekend of programs and field trips is also planned. Plan to join us!!! Registration materials will be provided in the *Cardinal News*.

October 11-13

Saw-whet Owl and Whooping Crane Trip. This event will feature an opportunity to help band saw-whet owls at a banding station at Stevens Point, WI, along with a visit to the "Birds in Art" exhibit at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Museum in Wausau. On the return trip, a stop at Necedah NWR will provide views of whooping cranes (and possibly the young of the Class of 2008 learning to follow the ultralights.) Pre-registration is required for this trip. Cost is \$260 per person, double occupancy. For information, contact Tom May at 618-475-2790 or samtum@compu-type.net

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