

American Kestrel Nest Boxes

Stewardship and Monitoring

This resource is intended for landowners that have a kestrel box installed on their property.

Building Back Kestrel Populations



- We have three species of falcons in Virginia - Peregrine Falcons, Merlins, and American Kestrels. Of those, kestrels are the smallest, and the only one that associates with grasslands and open farmland.
- Long term census data shows a downward trend for kestrels in Virginia. Lack of suitable nesting structures, changing habitats, and rodenticides could all be contributing factors.
- Building back healthy kestrel populations is important: these birds are an irreplaceable part of local ecosystems. Kestrels help keep rodent and insect populations in check, and they themselves are prey for larger, equally important raptors.



A Win-Win for Research and Conservation!



Our team has kestrel boxes spread across the northern Virginia Piedmont and Shenandoah Valley. Using these boxes, local researchers are studying the breeding biology of kestrels, their preference for nesting sites and foraging habitats, and their movements throughout the year. This data helps us better understand—and therefore protect—these birds. Meanwhile, the boxes provide a protected place for these birds to nest and fledge their young, helping give a boost to the local population.

Stewarding a Box

In some cases, our team may have the capacity to monitor your box as well as band the kestrels using it; if so, we will reach out to coordinate next steps.

However, our available capacity will **not** allow us to monitor **every** box. If we are unable to monitor yours, we ask that as a steward of a box, that you undertake the following:

1. Annually document whether or not the box was occupied by kestrels.
2. If so, were they successful at fledging young?
 - Noticing nestlings about to fledge from the box, or those that recently have, can be a bit challenging. Here's what to look for between mid-May and mid-July:
 - Heads sticking out of the nest box hole;
 - Family units: multiple kestrels near one another on trees, posts, or power lines near the box;
 - Families communicating: an increase in kestrel vocalizations in the area.
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3. Clean out the box once between Sept and Feb, and add a few handfuls of wood shavings after doing so.

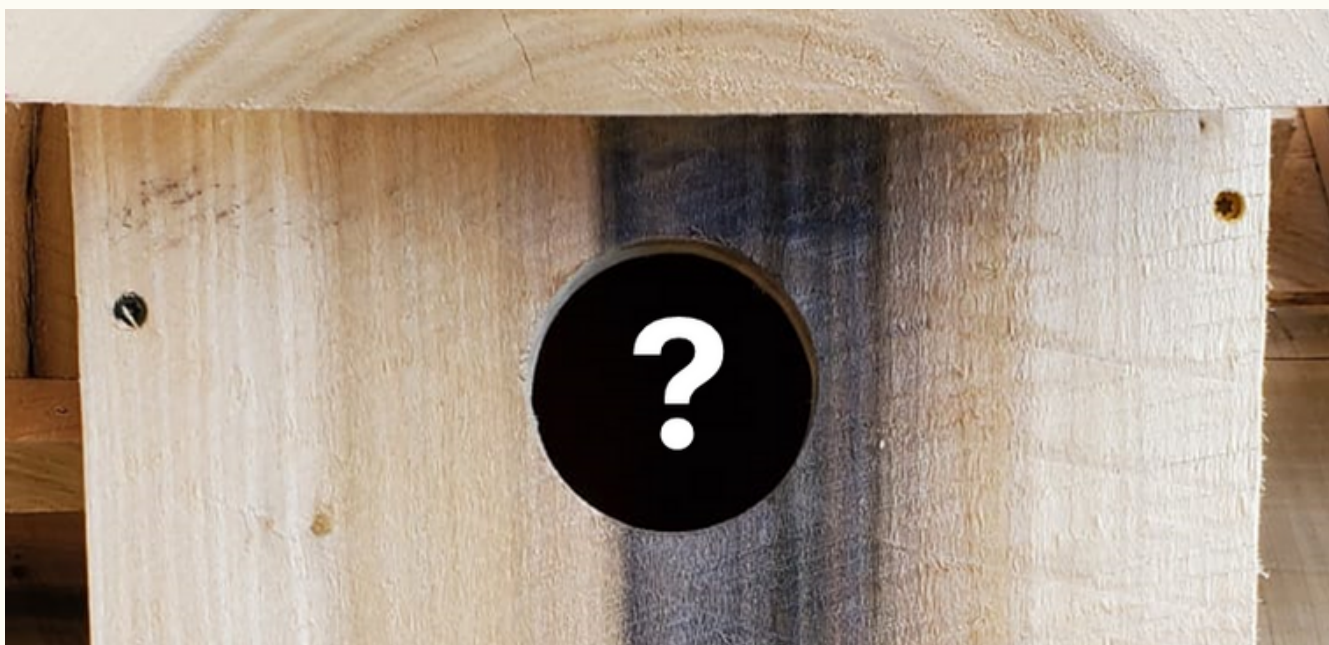
Are Kestrels nesting in your box?

That's great news, congratulations! We hope you get a lot of enjoyment out of watching these incredible birds nest, raise their young, and interact with your landscape.

- Remember, the purpose of the box is to create a safe location for kestrels to raise young. You want to make sure that your property is conducive to that. Make sure domestic cats are not allowed to freely roam and make sure that no rodenticides (bait blocks) are being used on the property (that includes around barns, the home, etc.).
- Remember that the box should **not** be opened during the nesting season unless by a trained professional, as eggs or chicks could easily become damaged by doing so.
- Take lots of photos and spread the joy of birdwatching with your friends and neighbors!



Illustration by
Nick Garnhart



No Kestrels? - That's Okay!

It can take several years for kestrels to find and adopt a new nest box. Sometimes, the location may simply not be a good fit, and after two or more years of inactivity, it's worth thinking about changing the box's location or orientation.

Found Something Else in the Box?

The nest box acts as a surrogate cavity in a tree, and there are a lot of other critters in need of cavities, so it's very common for something else to start using an empty box.



Starling nest with eggs

- Eastern Screech-Owls, Tree Swallows, Eastern Bluebirds, and Carolina Wrens might nest or just overnight in the box. That's great - you should let them stay (and note that it's illegal to remove or harass them).
- European Starlings, however, are a non-native species that we do not want nesting in the box. If starlings are entering the box, you can: (1) remove the nest, and/or (2) cap the entrance hole for a few days until they lose interest.

Thank you for stewarding a nest-box for American Kestrels. With most of Virginia's grasslands under private ownership, the future of grassland bird conservation depends greatly on the support and engagement of landowners and farmers like you.

Resource provided by the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative (vagrasslandbirds.org).
For more information or if you have questions, please reach out to
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