

Final Update ~ July 23, 2021

SHENANDOAH VALLEY RAPTOR STUDY AREA

LANCE & JILL MORROW

Helping hands and pocketbooks

Recently, we started a Go Fund Me campaign asking for funds to purchase materials to make nest boxes for kestrels and bluebirds and to help predator-proof retired silos where barn owls breed. It has been wildly successful! The goal of \$1500 was reached in less than 2 weeks! Thank you to all who donated. If you missed out, do not worry, there is still time to add your donation:

<https://gofund.me/ad4e3c19>

We will spend the money on plywood, screws, polyurethane and wood glue. Then we'll get them out to people who have volunteered to make the boxes. Again, thanks in advance for offering to cut and assemble the nest boxes, especially we thank you Tim. Also, we thank Doug Rogers who donated kestrel nest boxes that saved us this year. We used all Doug's boxes to replace our old boxes this past winter and most produced kestrels in 2021!

The Wegner family has given us a hand with a nest box across the road from their house.



Samuel (left) and Isaiah (right) holding nestling kestrels on banding day (photo by Tim Rocke).

As you can see from the camera slung around his neck, Isaiah is a great wildlife photographer in the making. He emailed us a couple of photos – see below.



Male kestrel on wire (wearing a bird band on his left leg – see arrow!) taken by Isaiah Wegner. It is likely that this bird is the breeding male in the nest box closest to the Wegner farm. If so, he banded when he was a nestling 2 years ago in the SVRSA.



Photo of male Baltimore oriole feeding nestlings taken by Isaiah Wegner.

Summary of 2021 banding

American Kestrels 309 new bands in SVRSA as follows: 273 nestlings; 5 new adults caught during winter and 31 new breeding adults. We also recaptured 5 previously banded adults in winter plus 52 previously banded breeding kestrels.

John in Highland County has banded 176 kestrels: 136 nestlings and 40 adults. **Grand total for new kestrel bands in 2021 = 485.** Missed our goal of 500 nestlings by 91 birds.

On a more upbeat note, Lance and Jill have personally banded over 2,800 kestrels since we established the SVRSA back in 2008!

Barn Owls 26 in SVRSA + 8 banded by Ben Spory south of SVRSA. **Grand total Barn Owls banded = 34.**

Screech Owls 9 in SVRSA (1 adult + 8 nestlings) + 17 banded by John in Highland County (7 adults + 10 nestlings) **Grand total = 26.**

Eastern Bluebirds **37**

Tree Swallows **8**

Flickers **3**

The kestrel nest box occupancy rate was higher than ever this year (93.5%), compared to 82% which is our long-term average. However, the hatching rate was a bit lower this year, so we ended up producing the same number of kestrels per successful nest (4.2 which equals the long term average).

Overall - it was a good year - except for starlings, whose population seems to be declining. Generally, people's first reaction to that news is "good" because they view starlings as a nuisance species. However, we think that starling decline is a dire indicator of decreasing availability of insects. Researchers around the globe have documented that the biomass of insects is plummeting due to habitat losses and pervasive use of pesticides and herbicides.

Starting a little over 2 weeks ago, starlings began forming large flocks. When you see one of these flocks in the field, it gives you a false impression of how well the population is doing. If you have never seen one of these flocks it is impressive, just imagine a ball of several hundred birds evading a lone Coopers Hawk soaring in the sky. Now that we are finished banding kestrels

for the season, we will start noting where these starling flocks are found, how many are in each flock and distance between flocks.

Now, back to kestrels. In general, kestrels who nest early in the season have larger clutches and are more successful at fledging young. Every year we find 2nd kestrel nests in SVRSA boxes, usually the 1st clutch has failed, and a different female comes in for the 2nd nesting. Very few individual kestrels produce young from 2 separate nest attempts the same season.

However, this year we documented a true 2nd nesting from a female who initiated her first nest of 5 eggs on March 16th, then successfully raised and fledged 4 babies. An estimated 3 days after the first batch of babies left box # 25B, the same female laid a second clutch of 4 eggs on May 27th. Of the 4 eggs in 2nd nest, only 1 hatched and we just banded it a few days ago. So, that is a true 2nd clutch, albeit a small one! Other females have attempted this feat a handful of times in the past, but she was the first to successfully lay and fledge 2 separate nests in one season. Note – only the earliest birds get a chance to do a 2nd nest. This female was hatched and raised in box #131 in the SVRSA in 2018. She chose box # 25B and has nested in it 3 consecutive years. In 2019 (laid 5 eggs, fledged 5 young), in 2020 (laid 5 eggs, fledged 5 young), and this year (laid 5 eggs in 1st nest, fledged 4 young and laid 4 eggs in 2nd nest, fledged 1 young). So, her lifetime production over 3 years is: 19 eggs laid producing 15 babies that successfully fledged.

Fun with flickers

In the past we have had just 2 flickers attempt to use our nest boxes in the SVRSA. Flickers are well known as the birds who usually make cavities in trees for nesting purposes, and other species (kestrels, screech owls and the like) use those once flickers leave. But, perhaps some flickers got lazy and decided to nest in our boxes instead of chiseling out their own holes. The first flicker laid 4 eggs and then abandoned them.



Flicker eggs with a dime for comparison. They are pearly coconut colored and much smaller eggs than kestrel eggs.

This year we had a kestrel lay eggs in mid-April, but they disappeared before hatching. We returned to this "failed" box on 3 July hoping to find a 2nd kestrel nest attempt.



Instead, Ben climbed the ladder and found 3 recently hatched flickers and 2 flicker eggs. The newly hatched flickers are, to put it in Ben's words, the "giraffe" of baby birds. Also notice the adult flickers have chiseled away on the sides of the box, creating lots of wood chips to add to the nest.



On 18th of July, we returned and banded 3 healthy young flickers – our first batch that succeeded. Hard to believe these photos are only 15 days apart! They grow a lot faster than kestrels.

Here's a story about flickers from Wyoming where we lived and banded all sorts of birds for 5 years. We had located a flicker nest in a small tree where the entrance hole was about 18" from ground level - which put the young flickers down inside the hole nearly at ground level. Nests of flickers produce noises that sound exactly like a swarm of bees. This is called Batesian mimicry and its purpose to deter predators who know sticking their head into a hole full of bees is a very bad idea. However, we knew the hole contained flickers and not bees so proceeded to set up to band the nestlings. Before we got started, Jill noticed at the base of the tree a *real* prairie rattlesnake who buzzed lazily to let us know he was present. He seemed pretty mellow, so Jill ignored him and proceeded to remove flickers for banding. The rattlesnake decided we weren't a threat so stopped rattling and eventually slithered off.



Kestrel at same age as the nestling flickers for comparison.

“Clover”, the Chocolate Kestrel

Every evening we turn her loose and walk around the garden. She sits on the trees or the house and watches us intently. Once in a while we see her jump down to catch and eat a moth or June bug but mostly she sits high in the trees and waits for us to call her to the glove for a tidbit. We have learned that over-ripe fruit on our fig trees is a good place to find June bugs, but Clover says her daily limit is about 4 and won't eat more if we find them.

We have enough information on Clover's aberrant plumage to write and submit a scientific paper to The Journal of Raptor Research now.



Lance and Clover watching TV together when she was about 3 weeks old. She still lands on our heads a lot.



Feel free to share or have anyone who wants to be added to the list send us an email:
saltlick2003@gmail.com

Lance & Jill Morrow