

First Update on the Shenandoah Valley Raptor Study Area April 15, 2023

Hey raptor, kestrel, owl, and bluebird fans! This is the 16th year of our kestrel nest box program in the Shenandoah Valley Raptor Study Area (SVRSA). Since its founding in 2008 with just 4 kestrel nest boxes, we have banded over 3000 American Kestrels to date! We also give bird bands to Eastern Bluebirds, Tree Swallows, Wrens, and Chickadees using our 66 bluebird nest boxes. In addition, young barn owls hatched inside abandoned silos are banded so we can follow them throughout their lives. However, in recent years only those barn owls that are accessible without climbing (i.e., nesting on the ground inside silos) are banded since we are too old to shimmy up chutes to our barn owl boxes near the tops of the silos.

Winter trap-a-thon

For a long time, we've wanted to invite other raptor trappers/banders to a "trap-a-thon" but were put off for 2 years by Covid. It finally happened on February 20th this year. There were only 2 vehicles trapping but it was fun anyhow. We took Alan Williams in our truck with us (Team 1). Bob Dean and October (Team 2) went off separately to catch their own kestrels. That day turned out to be pretty good for Team 1; we trapped 5 wintering kestrels in the SVRSA. Team 2 caught no kestrels, but they'd been trapping north of the study area where there were apparently no hungry kestrels. The kestrels we trapped were: 1) a female who'd been banded in KBOX131 by us in 2022 (who has since been recaptured in the same box, making this the 3rd time she's been handled by us); 2) an immature (second year) female with a foreign band that Bird Banding Lab didn't have information on (we surmised it was banded as a baby last year in one of Charles "Zig" Ziegenfus' local kestrel boxes); 3) an unbanded immature (SY) female near KBOX76, in which she has subsequently been recaptured inside the box on eggs this month; 4) a male who'd been banded in KBOX37 by us in 2022 and who was obviously wintering on his breeding territory (interesting tail photo below); and 5) a wild male between 2 of our boxes S. of Broadway on highway 42 that we suspect will be recaptured this year inside a box (if we are lucky). Lots of information on

the wintering vs. breeding locations of these kestrels can be gathered by winter trapping. Aside from the trap-a-thon, we did very little other winter trapping of kestrels, only catching one wild male wintering near a box we'd put up recently.



Retrapped male kestrel near KBOX37 with interesting tail pattern.

Wonderful Helpers and a Sad Note

This year we lost Charles “Zig” Ziegenfus who passed away recently at 80-some years old. He was the ornithology professor emeritus for James Madison University and was really getting into establishing his own kestrel box program. He told Lance that he wished he'd gotten into kestrel banding 20 years ago when he “could have made a difference” – alas. Our steadfast helper and subpermitted bander Ben Spory recently made a lifestyle change (he has reproduced) and won't be helping us out so much in our study area this year. We are grateful for the

continued support of longtime volunteer and friend Tim Rocke and a new helper/fellow falconer, Dr. Robert Gettleman.



Robert on left, Lance in center, and Tim on right. This kestrel box is one of 4 we placed on fences to figure out if kestrels would use such a low box. We captured a female kestrel inside this KBOX68 on 4 April, but she did not have any eggs in this box, so we suspect she will use a different box for nesting. Perhaps she was house hunting...

[SVRSA stats to date](#)

This year we have 85 kestrel nest boxes up throughout the study area (approximately 12 x 12 miles) centered on Timberville. Of the 85 boxes up this year, SIX are currently occupied by fox squirrels. Although it is early, to date, we have a total of 45 kestrel nest attempts in the remaining nest boxes and we expect to have at least 15 more boxes occupied.



Reading the band number on an incubating female kestrel we caught inside a nest box.



We knew this box was occupied by squirrels of substantial size because their mother is protecting them without having to actually babysit them!



Inside the box with the squirrel lounging on top we found her baby (about a month old).

Once the squirrels leave, kestrels have a chance to use the nest box (albeit later than they wanted to). As usual, we try to capture all female kestrels using our nest boxes and we've caught 30 so far this spring. No males have been caught inside boxes yet. So far, the kestrel egg count is 146 but this stat is meaningless because it changes every day!



Of interest are the ages and origins of our breeding female kestrels. This year (to date) we've captured 30 breeding female kestrels and found that 5 (17%) were banded as nestlings in our boxes in preceding years. These are called recruits and we know their exact ages: (1) 1-year old, (1) 2-year old, no 3-year olds, (1) 4-year old and (2) 5-year olds. The remaining birds are of unknown origin. They could be migrants that stopped to breed in our boxes, or they could've been hatched in our study area in "natural" cavities (not our boxes) like holes in walls of old houses, flicker holes in trees, etc. Of the 24 remaining birds: 10 were unbanded "wild" kestrels so we gave them bird bands. These 24 wild and recaptured wild birds

ranged in age from a **minimum** of 1 to 7 years old: (4) 1-year old, (11) 2-year old, (5) 3-year old, (2) 4-year old, and (2) 7-year old kestrels. So far during these 16 years of research, we have never had a breeding female that we knew was over 7 years of age.

We captured one kestrel who sported a band that was not ours (a “foreign” recapture). Upon reporting this bird band on the internet, we learned that this female kestrel was banded last May as a baby near Madisonburg, Pennsylvania about 165 miles NNE of her current nest box location. We assume she was banded as part of a nest box program but will check with the bander and get back with you.

Barn owls

Of the 30 barn owl nest sites we regularly monitor, we have 2 sites with barn owl eggs that have hatched this spring. The young owlets will be ready to band in a couple of weeks. Most of the sites still need to be checked for breeding activity.



Oh, what fun it is to chase down young barn owls in silage caves!

BTW, last November (2022), Ben Spory banded 5 young barn owls in a silo – a record **late** breeding attempt! Those eggs were probably laid in September!

Northern Saw-Whet Owl banding

Zig and Claire Mellinger began an owl banding station near Bergton in the NW corner of Rockingham County many years ago and Ben Spory has taken over the research program since both of the pioneers got too old to continue the grueling winter nighttime banding regimen. This past winter was very good for calling in (audio luring), capturing (mist net), and banding saw-whet owls. Ben and his helpers set up mist nets after dark to capture, measure, age, and band these charismatic little owls over 21 nights between November 1 through December 4th, 2022. They banded a total of 142 new birds plus they recaptured 9 previously banded owls. Well done Ben and helpers!!!

Ben works late into the night and then gets up early to go to work in the morning. If you all can spare it, this project could use an infusion of cash. Raccoons, possum, deer, great horned owls, and barred owls are always damaging the mist nets (which have gotten very expensive) that are used to capture owls. If you wish to help out, please contact us.



Northern Saw-whet Owl photo by Ben Spory. So cute!

As always, you can go to our Research Gate page to read any of our published papers: [ResearchGate](#)

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