

# First Update on the Shenandoah Valley Raptor Study Area April 7, 2024

Spring is here but the weather gods seem confused about what to send us. A few days ago, there was sleet, then rain, followed by sunshine, then gusty cold winds, and then more rain. Unsettling for us, but hopefully not for the raptors that call the Shenandoah Valley Raptor Study Area (SVRSA) home.

We are running late checking our kestrel boxes due to this unsettled weather (and a bit of lethargy on our part). It has always been our policy to only check kestrel boxes when it's a minimum of 55 degrees Fahrenheit because we don't want to disturb incubating kestrels by capturing them in cold temperatures. Eggs can chill and die if the female doesn't return quickly to incubate her clutch. Also, due to our safety and comfort concerns, we don't check boxes in winds over 10 mph or when it is raining. Ladders are inherently unsafe and become even more so in wet and/or windy weather.



Male kestrel in flight with “plastic wrap” filter applied. Photo by Doug Rogers.

So far this season, we have managed to check 31 of our 88 kestrel boxes with help from Tim Rocke, Corine & John Hagan, and Leah Martin. Thank you all! Young John had never had the opportunity to handle a kestrel, so we instructed him how to properly hold birds and allowed him to release all 3 kestrels we'd captured. In spite of being bitten by one, John was really having a good day as you can see from the photo taken Easter Sunday!





Of these 31 SVRSA boxes checked this March, 6 are occupied by kestrels (defined as having at least one kestrel egg). So far, we have captured 3 female kestrels in boxes with full clutches (4 or 5 eggs). Two females had been previously banded and one was a “wild” unbanded kestrel (that was until we caught her and banded her). One of the recaptures was a female who has been using box # 47 for the 3<sup>rd</sup> year in a row. The other recap was a female hatched in our SVRSA box 2 years ago. We didn’t catch her as a 1-year-old but this year she is 2 years old and nesting in a SVRSA box which is almost 10 miles southwest of her natal box.

One of our boxes had a fox squirrel interested in using it for raising her babies. We took this photo March 14<sup>th</sup> from the road and returned to check inside the box on March 31<sup>st</sup>. Since there were no baby squirrels inside, we removed the grass the squirrel had brought in. Now a pair of kestrels are behaving as if they own this box. Hopefully, the squirrel got the message to go nest in a tree somewhere!



We replaced our endoscope this year. It is a very useful tool to avoid climbing the ladder while getting a glimpse of what is inside boxes. We are getting clearer (but clearly not *good*) photos of occupants of boxes now! Like this one... of an apparently headless female kestrel on egg. (She was fine).



You can also see all the walls of the box are white from whitewash which is another word for kestrel poop. Research on Common Kestrels (*Falco tinnunculus*) and Lesser Kestrels (*Falco naumanni*) shows they actually prefer dirty nest boxes to clean (unused) boxes!

### [Screech owl nest boxes in the SVRSA](#)

Last year we placed about 8 boxes in locations around the SVRSA that we thought would be suitable for nesting Eastern Screech Owls (*Megascops asio*). To our disappointment, we had no nests in them in 2023. For those not familiar with screech owls, they come in 2 flavors or “color phases”, either red or gray. They don’t hoot like Great Horned Owls, instead they sound like a small pony whinnying. Google it, and you’ll be amazed if you’ve never heard one before. Very early March we checked some screech owl boxes and found 2 screech owls roosting inside, one of each flavor.



Top of a red-phase screech owl's head.

This year we have 18 screech owl boxes that we hope will be used by screech owls to make more of these beautiful and cute native raptors. So far, we have one gray mother incubating eggs! Sorry, no photo as we did not want to disturb her...





And, a gray-phase screecher in a different box. It is trying to camouflage itself by scrunching up it's face!

#### [Report from John Spahr in Highland County](#)

John is our counterpart, banding kestrels and screech owls in boxes in Highland County. Over the winter (December 2023-February 2024), he's captured and banded 10 screech owls. Four of the screechers were in owl boxes and 6 were in kestrel boxes. John has found that screech owls use the kestrel boxes for shelter in winter and for roosting during daylight hours, but they do not nest inside kestrel boxes which tend to be placed out in the open, away from trees. Currently, at least 3 of John's owl boxes contain screech owls incubating clutches of eggs. The boxes will not be disturbed until the chicks start to hatch (to get an estimate of the clutch initiation date), and again when the chicks are ready to band. Hopefully, he'll be able to recapture an adult parent or two while dealing with the chicks.



A smiling Dr. Spahr holding a gray phase screech owl captured while he/she was roosting during the day in a box during winter 2023.





Close-up of the little guy/gal. Note the new aluminum bird band on his/her leg. Credit for both photos of screech owls to Nancy Spahr.

John also reports that about half of the Highland County kestrel boxes have incubating female kestrels. More will follow as the season progresses. Traditionally, the peak of clutch initiation for kestrels in SVRSA is April 6<sup>th</sup> and we suspect it is similar in Highland County.



### Report on Northern Saw whet Owl banding from Ben Spory

I have been capturing and banding Saw whet owls near Bergton, Rockingham County for several years. Our annual banding of Saw whet owls usually kicks off the first of November and runs through the end of the month. However, our prior two seasons were netting good numbers of owls in the first week of the month and we knew that we were missing some good numbers in late October. In an attempt to better capture that data, we opened for the last week of October and had a very inauspicious start in 2023. We had not anticipated 80 degree daytime weather and only managed to capture a single new bird all that 1<sup>st</sup> week. Banding stations for Saw whet owls further north were also having a bad season, and it was looking to be near an all-time low. Fortunately, the weather changed, and all the banding stations began to get fair numbers of owls. Locally, we finished the season with average year, totaling 82 new birds and 10 foreign recaptures which had been previously banded in a wide range of eastern North America: from Canada and New York to Pennsylvania and West Virginia. We recaptured one of our own birds from last year as well. Our most interesting recapture was a 6-year-old female originally banded in Pennsylvania and then she was recaptured in West Virginia before visiting us in Virginia!



Northern Saw whet Owl photo courtesy of Ben Spory. So adorable!



Ben uses a black light to figure out how old these tiny owls are. Compounds in fresh feathers will appear pink under the black light while older feathers do not. Who figured that out??



### Other raptor species breeding in the SVRSA

We have located several active Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) nests in our study area this year. Sorry we have no good eagle pics to share. Near our house, nestled in a large woodlot, there are a couple of redtail hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) nests and a great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*) who is nesting atop an old Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) nest. The young owls should fledge from the heron nest before the herons need to use it later this spring. It will be interesting to see if the heron colony will be re-occupied this year. If so, it will be the 4th year our local woodlot colony has been active.

Happy birding y'all!

In a recent memo to all bird banders in North America, USGS wrote:

“If you discuss or share your banding projects to any public platform or social media, please indicate all banding, marking, and sampling is being conducted under a federally authorized Bird Banding Permit issued by the U.S. Geological Survey.”

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