## 3rd Update on the Shenandoah Valley Raptor Study Area May 23, 2024

## Kestrels in the SVRSA

Kestrels are doing well in the study area this spring. To date, of the 84 available nestboxes, 73 are being used by kestrels; put another way, occupancy rate is about 87% (which is enviable). Of these 73 nesting attempts by kestrels, we have captured all but 5 female kestrels. Three of those females were too spooky to approach the box and catch them inside before their eggs hatched. They will remain anonymous. One female we never caught had a failed nest, and the other, we hope to capture this Friday.

A total of 324 eggs have been laid in SVRSA nestboxes (to date). Below is a photo taken with the endoscopic camera of an unbanded female kestrel and her eggs in a box. She looks surprised / alarmed by the intrusion. Although it is poor photo, it tells a lot: her gender, the fact she is unbanded, and has eggs.



Banding of nestling kestrels has begun in earnest these past few weeks. So far, 84 young kestrels from 20 nestboxes have been marked with aluminum USGS bands that they will carry

for their lifetimes. We are hoping for 300 plus. The long-term average (2008-2020) in the SVRSA is 4.2 babies banded per successful nest. This year we have been averaging 4.2 thus far – so we're right on track!



We still have the bulk of nestboxes (42 more) to band baby kestrels in, which could be around 200 more nestlings – if all goes well. And, that's just the active nests we know about right now. But statistically, that's nearly all the nests we'll get for the year, as late nest attempts are few and regularly fail.



This young kestrel had eaten a blue-tailed skink, but it was too long to swallow! We carefully extracted the tail, and it turned out to be twice as long as what you can see here!

Of course, there are several kestrel nest failures; these usually occur during the egg-laying stage. This year, so far, we have recorded only 5 failed nests (7% failure rate). In the SVRSA, kestrels' failure rate over the long-term (2008-2020) is around 15%. So far, we've had good weather this spring which could be the key to fewer nest failures in 2024.



This photo shows fragments of kestrel eggs from a failed nest along with some of the bedding we had placed in the nestbox. Not sure what happened here, but it occurred early enough during the nesting season that there is a good chance for the kestrels to renest. The photo shows the deterioration of the nest box lid also. As in the past, we need approximately 50 new kestrel boxes to replace the older ones.

It is always interesting when you capture a banded kestrel who isn't yours. We caught one of Alan William's banded females on eggs in one of our boxes. She was banded and fledged last year from one of Alan's boxes just south of Bridgewater, which is past the southern edge of our study area. This bird went approximately 24 miles NNE from her natal box location to breed in our study area as a 1 year old. Similarly, we found out last night that our study area provided Alan's nest box project (centered on the Blue Ridge Parkway), with a 1 year old female kestrel. This bird fledged last year from a SVRSA box and ended up about 34 miles ESE where she was captured incubating 5 eggs in one of Alan's boxes near Woodville, VA in Rappahannock County yesterday. She flew over 2 mountain ranges away from her natal site!

For a few years now, we have been experimenting with placing kestrel nest boxes on fences, about 3' from ground level to the bottom of the nestbox. This year we've had mixed results for our 4 low boxes: 1 is still vacant, 1 had a bluebird nest in a corner (see photo below) and, now they've fledged, starlings have taken over that box, and the other 2 low boxes are occupied by kestrels with 4 and 5 egg clutches.



The bluebirds had to bring in a ton of extra grass to make this nest in a kestrel box, but they successfully pulled it off. We banded the nestling bluebirds and they all fledged. Now box is being used by starlings.

## Barn owls in the SVRSA



To date, we have banded 14 young barn owls at 3 different locations in the study area. All are nesting in silos that are no longer being used. The photo above is the typical scene inside a good barn owl nesting site with owls nesting directly on the floor of an old silo atop abandoned silage. In this photo, there are 5 young barn owls of different ages plus one unhatched egg that will likely never hatch (it appears to be soiled and is not being incubated).



In this old metal silo we found a dead barn owl. The young owl had gotten entangled in some plastic sheeting inside the silo and was unable to get itself free so, presumably, starved while trapped in the bottom. The body was a skeleton with a bird band and some bedraggled feathers. Upon retrieving it, the bird band told us this was a nestling who'd been banded there 2 years ago. Plastic strikes again!

## Lots of helping hands – many thanks to you all

Recently we've had lots of help from folks interested in raptors; we really appreciate it!



Dr. Robert Gettleman checking a nest box.



This silo is one of the most difficult to get inside to check for, and band, barn owls. Lance and I are too old and inflexible to navigate this one - so we rely on young people. This year Ben Spory, a fellow bander and long-time assistant for the SVRSA, brought a climber buddy, Chris Lehman. Sorry, we don't have a photo of you two! After removing the round funnel (lying on the ground in the photo), both men wormed past the red metal conveyor assembly, then climbed up into the chute of this silo to an opening that let them access its interior which is 25% full of old silage with caves where barn owls like to hide. When they descended the silo after banding the youngsters, this longhorn cow greeted them at the bottom of the chute.



She was just curious why people were on her farm!



Ben's photo of the pile of nestling barn owls in the longhorn silo. They typically huddle together for warmth and protection, which also makes it difficult to count them. Ben and Chris banded 5 of the 6 barn owls; the youngest was too small to band.



Richard Morrison and Jennifer Dudak, both from SW Virginia, drove up to help band kestrels and barn owls.



Richard Morrison and Jill banding a young barn owl at an old silo site.



Our long time helper and now a bander, Tim Rocke, brought along his brother, Ron Rocke, who is showing Lance some unhatched kestrel eggs.



John Hagan at bottom of ladder, Alex Schwar checking box contents, and Corine Hagan holding bucket to place nestlings in for banding at a kestrel box. The Hagans have helped for 2 years, and we just met Alex, who volunteered to install and monitor kestrel and barn owl nestboxes on the Manassas National Battlefield Park.



And, lastly, EMU high school student Martha Wyse came out to help on May 21<sup>st</sup>.

Thank you all very much!

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."

As always, you can go to our Research Gate page to read any of our published papers: <u>ResearchGate</u>

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