

2014 Black Hole Kestrels

Story and photos submitted by Kestrel monitor Lynn Walters-Fraze, (Black Hole Preserve, Emmet County)

Last October when the LTC asked if I would be willing to be a monitor for the American Kestrel Project I had no idea what to expect. Jim and Wendy Bean came out to install the nest box in the Black Hole Preserve just west of my farmland. Then we experienced a winter with record snowfall and unusually cold temperatures. On April 13, 2014 I thought I saw one Kestrel fly by the nesting box and the following day a pair of Sandhill Cranes mated by the windmill atop my hill. I had been reading the American Kestrel website about pairs nesting and my concerns were growing as there appeared to be no activity around my box. Then on Sunday, April 20, I noticed cedar shavings on the ground and thought I heard scratching noises inside the box. I did not lower the box to check inside, but feared that perhaps it was some rodent or some other bird in the box. Then as fate would have it, I was called out of town for two weeks.

On Mother's Day (May 11), I lowered the Kestrel Box LTC032 and opened it for the first time to find one egg. I was so excited that I emailed Jim and Wendy immediately. They explained that the mother Kestrel might lay up to 6 eggs, but that it takes two days for her to lay each egg. Jim suggested I wait a full two weeks before opening the box again to make sure not to scare off the mother before all her eggs were laid: "Once she is incubating the eggs, the mother bird will not abandon the nest," he said. This advice paid handsomely. To my delight, there were five Kestrel eggs in the box when I opened it on May 25. I waited another two weeks before opening the box again. But on Sunday, June 8, still no eggs had hatched even though my calculations were that it had been 28 days since the first egg had been laid. Throughout the process, I regularly communicated with Jim and Wendy and researched the website to learn about the incubation and fledging.

Finally, on June 15, when the box was lowered and the mother flew out of the nest, I opened it to find both eggs and chicks. The chicks were so fluffy and huddled so closely that I could not be sure if there were three or four. I could see one egg, but if there was another, it must be hidden beneath the ball of fluff. A week later when I lowered the box, I was worried because I did not see the mother dart out. This time there were clearly five fuzzy chicks. Mother must have been hunting as they all appeared quite healthy. Monitoring the Kestrels made me a better all-around bird watcher. For example, I began to notice that every time the Killdeer climbed on top of my mulch pile and screamed alarms, the Kestrels were usually hunting from atop my windmill. It made my life as a photographer much easier once I began to learn and observe different birding behaviors.

On June 29 at 1:30 pm, shortly after a thunderstorm, I spied the mother atop my windmill. The five babies had grown considerably and were beginning to lose their fuzzy down feathers. The following Sunday, the five babies appeared to be almost fully grown. However, with the exception of one male who stood alert staring at me from the rear of the box, the others appeared lifeless lying on the cedar shavings, not making a sound. Concerned that there was something wrong, I emailed Jim and he explained that the babies were now used to the routine of me lowering the box and "simply hunkered down as soon as they felt the box move." The babies were so large at this

point, they barely fit inside the box, so I was careful to only open the door part way to take my photo out of fear one might fall out. Jim explained that the first babies should fledge the following week, so it would not be necessary to lower the box any more. The following Thursday, Jim and Wendy kindly drove all the way to my house to loan me a portable camouflage netting blind so I could get closer to the box to photograph the fledglings. Their parting words were, "You are going to have a very exciting next couple of weeks." And they were right.

Fortunately, when Jim and Wendy installed the nest last fall, we picked a spot I could observe with binoculars from inside my home. At fledging time this became a major advantage. I began to notice the fledges peeking out of the hole in the box as the adults in a nearby tree called to them constantly to "fly the coop." With the blind, I was able to creep to within a hundred feet of the nest and sit for hours beneath the shade of a large tree observing up close. That was the week of the Super Full Moon, and the first time, I noticed an Eastern Kingfisher chasing the mother Kestrel. I began spending several hours a day watching the Kestrels, but never was fortunate enough to see one of the fledglings actually fly out of the box. All of a sudden, it seemed there were Kestrels everywhere in the treetops, on every rung of the windmill, in the grasses of the lower fields, on electric wires, and even on top of my silo.

Then on July 18 at about 7 pm, through the long glinting rays of the sun, I noticed one of the fledglings sitting on top of the nesting box. Without the aid of the netting, I simply walked across my field toward the windmill and down the hillside all the while veering slightly north to get the sun to my back to get more than a silhouette photograph. I was able to approach within 50 feet of the box, and the male fledgling watched my every move, but did not fly away. He even turned around so that his tail was flat on top of the box so it appeared as if he was reclining in an easy chair. His sister, who had been perched next to him, had darted away from the box as soon as

I left my house, confirming her incredible eyesight at great distances.

Over the next week, I noticed this one lone male fledgling was the only one who would allow me to approach without flying away. It dawned on me that perhaps he was the first one born, the first to open his eyes, and the one who stood staring at me each time I opened the box. My theory is that "the big eye" of my camera lens and I accidentally imprinted on this baby Kestrel, so naturally I have chosen to personify him by naming him "Mikey" after the Life cereal child of the 1970s.

The mother Kestrel has expanded her territory out of the preserve, across the road, and into the woods to the east and daily calls the fledglings to follow. Now they perch atop the trees right next to my house and hunt in the fields 50 feet outside my door. Almost every afternoon around 1pm without fail, I am distracted from computer work by loud chattering signaling that the five siblings have successfully killed another mouse or vole. My camera sits ready on the chair and my screen door remains open in the event I am lucky enough to photograph their group celebration in the field before the one with the prize flies off.

They are full of childhood glee and I have watched them play "king of the mountain" on top of my mulch piles. On windy days, there is nothing lazy about their circles in the sky but rather they have made a racetrack from tree to tree on the perimeter of my farm and they are exciting and beautiful to watch.

