

American Kestrel Nest Box Monitoring Guidelines



Phase 1: Pre-season check

Shortly before the kestrels are due to return (early March), you should do a pre-season check to get the box ready and ensure that it is in good order.

1. **Open** – If the box was closed for the winter to prevent squirrels, sparrows, and starlings from using it, open it now.
2. **Lining** – Line the bottom of the box with a few inches of pine shavings or wood chips. Do not use sawdust, as it will not insulate the eggs properly, and do not use cedar shavings, as these are toxic to young birds.
3. **Inspection** – Inspect the box and its mounting pole. Do any parts appear cracked or broken? This is the time when a replacement box can be erected – once the season starts, it will be much harder.

Phase 2: Early breeding season

During the early breeding season (from late March onward), all that needs be done is to assess whether the box has been selected by kestrels. One hour-long visit every two weeks should be sufficient. If the box is likely to be taken over by House Sparrows or starlings, weekly visits should be made to check for these invasives. If kestrels are seen going in and out of the box, you may well have nesting kestrels. If squirrels, starlings, or House Sparrows are seen, the box may have been invaded. Observe for a time, and if you determine that another animal is using the box, wait for the adult animals to leave. Once the adults are outside, simply close the box. Mark down what happened and leave the box closed for the remainder of the season. **Note: This does not apply to native birds such as Tree Swallows, House Wrens, Eastern Bluebirds, and Eastern Screech-Owls. It is against Federal Law to interfere with the nesting of these species in any way! If they move into the box, record this and leave them be.**

Alternatively, if the box has been invaded by European Starlings or House Sparrows, you can remove the nesting material to dissuade these invasive species from using the box. Sometimes they will leave, allowing kestrels an opportunity to move in.

Phase 3: Focus on breeders

By the middle of the season, you should have an idea of which boxes of yours have kestrels. Nests with active pairs should be monitored at least once a week for an hour at a time. Observers should record dates and times of each observation period. During monitoring, particular attention should be paid to food deliveries, particularly the number of deliveries/hour and the identity of each prey item, as exactly as possible (*Sympetrum* is better than “dragonfly,” which is better than “large insect,” but all are acceptable).

If the pair successfully hatches young, notify Christine Thurber (thurber.christine@gmail.com) so that arrangements for banding can be made. Continue monitoring until young fledge successfully and depart area of the nest. **DO NOT open the nest box early in the incubation process or when the chicks are soon to fledge. In the former case, the parents may abandon the nest, while in the latter case the chicks may fledge prematurely. If you’re not sure what stage the nest is at, don’t open the box! Just watch from a safe distance away.**

Phase 4: Post-season

After the birds depart, clean out the box. Remove any old shavings and food detritus, close the box if you need to, and perform another inspection for damage.