

Fostering American Kestrel Nestlings

By Penny Brandau

My husband Fritz and I have been bluebird trail monitors for many years and have also monitored a successful kestrel box for the past three years in Lorain County, Ohio. We volunteer with the Black River Audubon Society's bluebird and kestrel programs. This year we had the privilege of being part of a multi-organizational attempt to save some orphan kestrel nestlings from life in a rehab center by placing them into an active kestrel nest and monitoring the outcome closely to see the benefits or deterrents of fostering. Our program had done no kestrel fostering before so this was unfamiliar territory to all of us.

Many organizations worked together to enable this idea to become a reality. Lorain County Community College has partnered with Black River Audubon Society to create a meadow preserve where the kestrel box was erected 3 years ago (and where 15 kestrels have now fledged). Larry Wilson is the program coordinator for the kestrel program. Master bird bander Gary Fowler has banded all the kestrel chicks from the LCCC kestrel nest box in 2015, 2016 and 2017. Tim Jasinski, a Wildlife Rehabilitation Specialist of Lake Erie Nature and Science Center assisted in banding all the kestrels and provided the vision and link between the orphan kestrel nestlings from the Ohio Bird Sanctuary and the potential of fostering some of their young kestrels into the active Black River Audubon Society kestrel nest at LCCC.

On April 18, 2017, my husband and I checked the kestrel box at LCCC and found it to be still empty although we saw a pair of kestrels near the box, sitting on power lines as they had done in the prior two years when nesting. Our next visit to monitor the box was on April 26th and we were excited to find 4 kestrel eggs nestled in the protective bed of wood shavings we had placed in the box in Feb. Subsequent visits on 5/2 and 5/18 showed a complete clutch of 5 eggs but unfortunately only two of these eggs had hatched on 5/28. Anticipated hatch date was 5/27 so we made another brief visit on 6/2 to find that there were still only 2 kestrel chicks and 3 unhatched eggs in the box.



Larry Wilson contacted Tim Jasinski to arrange for banding the two female kestrel nestlings in the LCCC kestrel box and another check was made of the nest box on 6/10 to confirm that there were still only two to band. Photos taken of the two chicks were compared to photos in a resource book titled "A Photographic Timeline of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary's American Kestrel Nestlings" and the chicks were aged at approx. 13 days old. This corresponded closely with the timeline of the first egg and observed hatch date. Ideal banding age of kestrels according to Master Bander Gary Fowler is around 18-22 days

because that is when you can more easily distinguish male from female. The LCCC female kestrel pair were about 17-18 days old on 6/14 when they were banded. Tim Jasinski assisted with the banding and observers/helpers were Larry Wilson, Arlene Ryan, Fritz and Penny Brandau and several others.



Tim Jasinski knew that the LCCC kestrel nest had only 2 nestlings and he wondered if it would be possible to successfully place orphaned kestrel chicks of similar ages into the LCCC nest so that they would be cared for by their own species and fledge into the wild. He was aware of at least 7 kestrel nestlings which were being raised by wildlife rehab specialists. Wouldn't it be wonderful if some of these could be raised by adults of their own species and given a chance to live freely? We were willing to accept 2 or 3 foster kestrels into the LCCC nest. The parents had successfully raised 5 young last year and the year before and were experienced parents. The ages of the young kestrel orphans were similar and the habitat was ideal.

I talked to kestrel expert Dick Tuttle of Delaware County, Ohio regarding the fostering plan and he suggested that perhaps the diet of the young should be briefly supplemented with mice or house sparrows to help the parents during the sudden rapid increase in their clutch size. Again, Tim came through by providing frozen white mice. The plan was for the Brandau's to place 2 thawed mice into the kestrel box hole every couple of days to help the parents feeding just in case it might be needed.

On June 19th, the LCCC kestrel box was lowered on its telescoping pole by Fritz Brandau and Larry Wilson and 3 foster kestrel nestlings (one male and two female) were placed by Tim Jasinski into the box along

with two thawed mice. The foster kestrels had been banded on their left legs earlier by Gary Fowler to distinguish them from the two LCCC kestrels which he had banded on their right legs on June 14th.

Tim suggested a wait of two days for the kestrels to “settle in” before attempting to lower the nest box to place two more thawed mice into the nest box hole. On June 21st, my husband and I lowered the box and placed two thawed mice in the entrance hole. However, when the door was opened briefly to check that all five kestrels were still doing well it was apparent that only three kestrels were in the box! Our fears were that the slightly older foster kestrels might have eaten the two LCCC female kestrels. A quick phone call and texting to Tim ensued and it was decided that since clear visibility of the kestrel leg bands wasn’t possible when the nest box was initially lowered that it would need to be lowered once more to confirm if the kestrels in the box were native or foster kestrels. If the bands were on the left legs then we decided we would not attempt fostering kestrel nestlings in the future at the expense of the native ones.

When the nest box was lowered the second time and the door was opened to get a quick photo the foster male kestrel decided to bail out of the door! Fritz quickly captured him and placed him back in the box- this was obviously a premature fledging since he only made it a few feet into the meadow grass near the box. However, the photo which was taken of the box contents clearly showed that although the foster male’s leg band was on his left leg the female’s was on her right leg! What a relief to have proof that the two females in the box were the slightly younger LCCC females and the two foster female kestrels must have fledged! Whew!



On June 25th Fritz and I were walking the LCCC meadow perimeter checking the 18 bluebird boxes when a female kestrel suddenly appeared from the east and alarm called as we neared bluebird boxes #5 and 6. She persistently called and hovered then flew to the windmill platform. We were able to see a female kestrel sitting on a solar panel and her left leg band was clearly seen in a photo. This was very encouraging! Mom kestrel was protecting and caring for this foster fledgling! The other LCCC kestrels were due to fledge around June 27.

On June 27 Fritz and I again returned to LCCC to check on the kestrels. None were seen at their box but when we walked to the east end of the meadow Fritz spotted a kestrel on the LCCC turbine tower. This

kestrel flew toward us as we approached bluebird boxes 5 and 6 and alarm called as she flew. We then noticed several other kestrels on or under solar panels of the roof of a small building in that area. Some looked like they were enjoying the sun while others were relaxing in the shade of the panels. We definitely saw at least 6 kestrels! The male and one of the females were under the panel, three others were on the roof peak and one was under the opposite side of the panel. You can see the two shade lovers even in the second photo if you look closely.



On June 28th we went to LCCC to clean out the kestrel box. An adult kestrel appeared overhead and alarm called as we circled the meadow. We then realized that at least 3 kestrels were on the LCCC turbine platform (the photo cropping revealed 4 kestrels). Mom kestrel flew to a tower line which was south of the turbine and another kestrel was seen below her on the line. This made a count of at least 6, possibly 7, kestrels seen again on this day.





I walked the area once more on July 1 and saw at least 6 kestrels in the eastern area of the meadow. I don't know how long they will stay together as a family but this experience of helping with the fostering of rehab kestrel nestlings has proven that kestrels can accept, care for and protect foster nestlings which are placed in their active nests. They continue to care for them after fledging too. It has been amazing and beautiful to observe.

It has been a privilege to work with so many different organizations and talented, dedicated people to make Tim Jasinski's vision a reality. Allowing kestrels to be raised in a family unit instead of a rehab facility is a clear win for the kestrels! Hopefully this story will challenge other rehab and conservation organizations to work more closely together and to communicate opportunities for placing orphan kestrels whenever possible into appropriate foster nests.

