

KESTREL NESTING BOXES

The American Kestrel, perhaps the strongest bird of prey for its weight, is a common breeding resident of Massachusetts. A cavity nester, the kestrel uses abandoned woodpecker holes and, occasionally, holes in eaves of buildings. However, competition from starlings and squirrels and the increased cutting of dead and diseased trees have reduced the number of potential nest sites available in many areas. The kestrel appears to be holding its own in New England, but in many regions of the country it is in serious decline. The loss of suitable nesting sites might be a major reason for this discouraging trend.

You can increase the number of potential nest-sites by constructing rather simple nesting boxes; the kestrel is our only native hawk that will readily nest in a box.

In Massachusetts, most kestrels return to their breeding grounds from late February through March, so one should begin to construct these boxes as soon as possible. Follow the simple diagram and instructions given below:

1. Use raw wood; do not paint or treat with a wood preservative.
2. Do not construct an outside roost: it only attracts starlings.
3. Place 3" of sawdust or shavings on the bottom of the box - kestrels use no material from the outside.
4. When attaching the box to a tree, use only one nail or wood lag on the top and one on the bottom; more will split the backboard as the tree grows.
5. Construct an inside roost using the cut-out from the entrance. Nestlings will appreciate the view, and you will too. Place the roost about 3" below the entrance hole.

Ideally, the boxes should be placed on large isolated trees in the open or along fence rows. The boxes should be 15-20 feet above the ground, facing east or south. If possible, use bare-limbed trees. Kestrels prefer a quick, uninhibited exit; remove any branches from their flyway. Avoid trees with climbing vines, such as grape or poison ivy, as these are open invitations to snakes to steal the eggs or young.

The American Kestrel lays 3 to 5 eggs, which require an average of 28 days for incubation. The majority of young will leave the nest from late May through June. Fledglings will remain in the nest area for only a short time.

Please do not jeopardize nesting birds or their young through thoughtlessness. The kestrel often nests near sites of intense human activity, but many of these birds do not like to be closely observed entering the nest. View the birds' approach to the nest nonchalantly, from a distance. Don't look in the box while the falcons are using it. Any human scent on the tree trunk will attract predators, such as the weasel and the raccoon. The latter are a major threat to nesting hawks in eastern Massachusetts. If you must examine the box, use a ladder, not pole climbers.

If you have success with your kestrel nesting boxes, we would appreciate hearing of it. We would like to thank Alex Nagy and the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association for permission to use their published materials on kestrel nesting boxes.

P.M.R.

