

ConserveWildlife

FOUNDATION OF NJ

The American Kestrel Nestbox Project



The Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ's mission is to protect New Jersey's rare wildlife. We do this by partnering with the NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife's Endangered and Nongame Species Program on research, education, and conservation issues. Dedicated to the conservation and protection of over 70 endangered and threatened species, we work hard to protect habitats for bald eagles, peregrine falcons, bobcats, bog turtles, and other species that struggle for survival in the most densely populated state in the nation. One such species we are trying to protect is the American kestrel.

The American kestrel is a beautiful robin-sized falcon and the most colorful of North American raptors. What makes the kestrel unique is that they are the only North American falcon or hawk to nest in cavities – not only in natural cavities and woodpecker holes but also in the eaves of buildings and barns and constructed nestboxes. Apt and able hunters, they hunt large insects, bats, mice, birds and small reptiles and effectively contribute to pest management, especially in farmers' fields.

Currently listed in New Jersey as a species of special concern (not yet endangered or threatened but on its way), the population of American kestrels in New Jersey is declining based on surveys conducted in 2004 and 2005 and state biologists want to find out why. In order to better gauge the kestrel population in New Jersey and determine nest productivity, the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ, in partnership with the New Jersey Endangered and Nongame Species Program, has begun a nestbox monitoring program throughout the state. Nest boxes have been erected in four geographic areas throughout the state and are monitored by state wildlife biologists and trained volunteers five times throughout the year to measure success or failure of the nestboxes. It is our hope that these nestboxes will provide new nesting sites thus increasing the American kestrel population statewide.

The American Kestrel Nestbox Project is a collaborative effort involving schools, municipalities, counties, local non-profit organizations, scout troops, corporations and private citizens. Opdyke Lumber in Frenchtown generously donated wood, screws, and nails to build 300 nestboxes. Tom Hartman, a carpenter from Stockton, NJ helped by cutting and pre-drilling the wood to aide in the construction of the boxes by school children. Several schools throughout the state helped to build the nestboxes. Thank you to the **Ridge and Valley Charter School** in Blairstown, **Middlesex County Vo-Tech High School** in Old Bridge, NJ, **Delaware Township School** in Sergeantsville, NJ and **Atlantic County Special Services School District** in Mays Landing, NJ. Additionally, **Boy Scout Troop 136** from Long Valley and **Boy Scout Troop 10** from Lakehurst also built boxes. While the primary focus of the education component was building the nestboxes, these children also learned about the kestrel and its habitat. Through videos, activities, posters and presentations by biologists and environmental education specialists, these human nestbox builders learned about birds, raptors, American kestrels, and the habitats they rely on for survival.

Washington Crossing Audubon Society generously provided grant monies for the education component of the American kestrel nestbox project.

Other project partners include:

- Dr. John Smallwood, Montclair State University who provided overall guidance in the research design of the project.
- Duke Farms, Hillsborough Township, Rutgers Sneider Farm, Rutgers Cream Ridge Farm, Hunterdon County Parks, New Jersey Conservation Foundation, Upper Raritan Watershed Association, Janssen, as well as private citizens have allowed the placement and monitoring of nestboxes on their property.

In Spring of 2006, over 130 boxes were erected in 3 geographic areas in the state. Biologists monitored the boxes throughout the spring and summer to determine suitable habitat requirements and reproductive success. At the conclusion of the nesting season, 18 boxes were used by kestrels with 27 fledglings banded.

In 2007, we plan to expand the American kestrel monitoring project by adding an additional study area in the southwestern part of the state as well as adding nestboxes to the existing study areas. We also plan to turn over monitoring responsibilities to a group of Citizen Science volunteers. Volunteers will “adopt” a group of boxes that they will monitor throughout the nesting season and submit their data to be incorporated into a database for analysis. If you are interesting in volunteering for the American kestrel nestbox project, please contact Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ at 609-984-0621 or via email to maria.grace@conservewildlifenj.org.