

Photographing Kestrels at Sandy Mush Game Lands

by Alan Lenk and Joe Tomcho,
photos by Alan Lenk



A.Lenk

Blind and Nest Box



Back in May I had the opportunity to photograph Kestrel nesting boxes at the Sandy Mush Game Lands. Doug Johnston, accomplished birder of the Sandy Mush Game Lands and EMAS supporter, and Joe Tomcho, Wildlife Tech II, who began the Kestrel Restoration Project and is part of a team that oversees the Game Lands for the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, were very helpful in setting up the opportunity for me to photograph the kestrels. Of the 21 or so kestrel nest boxes within the Game Lands, I chose nest box 9, just south of Turkey Creek Bridge on the Old Marshall Highway.

I first began to watch Box 9 from the road in early May in hopes of seeing adults making feeding visits. I did not want to set up the blind and carry equipment up the steep hill until I was sure adults would be making regular visits to the box. Then I received an email from Joe saying that he had checked Box 9 and there were 5 chicks inside; he even sent a phone photo of the chicks. It was time to set up and get started.



The blind was placed about 45 feet from the nest box. Camera equipment consisted of a sturdy tripod supporting a Nikon D7100 digital camera fitted with the Nikon 300mm f2.8 lens, plus a small folding camp chair. I prefocused the camera on the nest opening and then turned off auto focus. In the viewfinder I created the scene to allow 4 or 5 feet of space in front of the nest box for adult flight shots to the nest. The nest box was visible on the right side of the viewfinder. Fast shutter speed is critical for flight shots and I used 1000- 2500th of a second to freeze action, depending on ambient light conditions. Small mesh-covered windows in the blind provided a view of the nest box and the area in front. When a kestrel was seen flying to the nest, I held down the camera shutter button that fired the camera at approximately 6 frames per second. I kept my finger on the shutter release the entire time the adult was approaching and at the box, usually 10 seconds or less.



Bird photography requires patience and perseverance. I first entered the blind on May 16 and my last visit was May 31. Over these 16 days I visited the blind on 10 occasions spending 2 to 2.5 hours each time for total of about 24 hours. While inside the blind I estimate seeing feedings every 30 minutes on average. Sometime feedings occurred every 10-15 minutes as adults took turns. A few times feedings were an hour apart. At least ninety-five percent of the time in the blind consisted of waiting. Feeding by adults lasted a matter of seconds.

One morning I arrived at the blind and it had been partially flattened, pounced upon by a bear that also chewed on the chair. In 15 minutes I had the supporting wire hoops of the blind bent back into shape. I always carried my camera equipment with me when I left!



The photos in the article consist of three main types: pre-fledging photos of parents bringing in prey for feeding chicks at the nest, then leaving; banding photos of chicks that occurred on May 20th under the direction of Mark Hopey with Southern Appalachian Raptor Research, and post-fledging photos of two birds out of the nest interacting with adults, each other, and with chicks remaining in the nest. Some photos clearly show the kinds of prey brought to the nest. The prey included dragon fly, grasshopper, other insects, vole, mouse, lizard, and possibly a frog. The last day I visited, 1 June, I saw no feedings, no adults at the nest, and no chick with its head out of the box. Joe checked the box a few days later with no sign of kestrel activity. All had fledged! Success! The fledglings, 3 males and 2 females were spotted on 6 June ~ $\frac{3}{4}$ mile away in a farm field with some locust trees and were being fed by both adults. This marks their dispersal from their natal territory and their journey to survive and hopefully return to nest on the game lands.



*Joe Tomcho and Maria Palamar, a vet,
about to remove chicks for banding.*



Mark Hopey banding chick



Chick resting after banding



The photography experience was truly fun and I am very grateful to Doug Johnston and Joe Tomcho for their help and providing this opportunity.

PS: Stay tuned for a report from Joe Tomcho on this season's kestrel nesting activities sometime this fall.



Fledgling female on top of nest box



Fledgling Male visiting nest box