

Kestrel Nest Boxes: A Source of Reverence and Beauty

by Johanna Jackson

I was kneeling near rhubarb, pulling out thistles, when my neighbor Gerald walked up. It was April 2020: pandemic week three. We needed to weed, transplant, hoe, drip tape, and irrigate – as well as plan for the breakdown of civilization.

“Want to come up the hill?” Gerald called. Jon Kaufman, a local birder, walked with him. A visit from Jon Kaufman was like a small vacation. He had once shown me how to find nighthawks at dusk. I dropped my work, shivering, and stood up.

Jon’s beard was grayer than I remembered. He carried a long orange pole in one hand. “It’s April,” he said, “and you’re wearing a winter jacket and snow pants.”

Rain pants, I thought reflexively. A storm had passed by the day before, bringing in cold air. I asked him what the pole was for.

“Checking nest boxes.” He motioned toward it with his chin. “A camera goes on that end.”

We trotted up the hill, keeping a six-foot distance. (We hadn’t learned, yet, that breathing outside was fairly safe.) Gerald loped ahead and unlatched a gate for us. “Be careful with the chain on this one,” he warned, pointing to the electric fence. “The wires might be hot.” Jon and I hesitated. New to social distancing, we danced around each other and the fence. In the awkwardness, I snagged my rain coat on the wire and got another tear.

Beyond us, 15 feet in the air, a bird box stuck out from the fence line. We gathered loosely below it. “Hope it’s not a starling in there,” Jon said. He strapped his phone to the pole and lifted it to the



The Cornell Lab of Ornithology records this mother kestrel through its web cam, posted inside of a nest box. Photo from The Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Live footage at AllAboutBirds.org/cams.

The entrance to the bird box was three inches wide; Jon’s phone was at least that large. It was going to be a tight fit. He shifted his footing and barely slid the camera inside. He brought the phone back down and studied it.

Jon sounded glum. “Yup, it’s a starling,” he muttered. “Too bad. She’ll be persistent.” We had been hoping for kestrels, a natural predator in our area. Kestrels eat mice, voles, grasshoppers, and cicadas. They’re helpful to have on a farm. They’re also quite beautiful: kestrels have the angular wings of a falcon with a streak of black along their eyes. Starlings, imported from Europe, kick out native birds from their nests. “We’d better take it out,” Jon said. Gerald, tallest among us, yanked at the base of the nest box. It was too heavy, though. The pole fell back to the ground with a thud. It looked like an awkward job for one person, but Jon and I couldn’t help without breathing on him.

“I suppose you might just –”

“What if I –”

“Maybe you could try to –”

Gerald looked up, and jumped on top of the nearest fence post. He balanced his six-foot-three frame on a post smaller than a frisbee. His feet were mashed together; I did not envy his footing.

The wind started to pick up. The box began to wobble. I wondered if it would –

“How do you feel about catching it?” Gerald called, looking at Jon. Jon planted his feet apart, making his arms into a basket. Gerald rotated the pole left and right, but couldn’t yank it free. I realized that we may have to get the bird out another way.

“There should be a nail on your right hand side,” Jon suggested. Gerald reached around back. “No, not that one – the other one.” He pawed around blindly. “Right there. That part opens up,” Jon said, shielding his eyes. I could see a hinge near Gerald’s hand. The back hatch was about three inches from his face.



These young chicks huddle together for warmth during a cold spring morning. Baby birds are born with a light coat of white down. By the first or second day of life, their eyes open partially. Photo courtesy of Jon Kaufman.

“And is there – is there a starling inside?” Gerald asked. I had been wondering this myself. “Nah, she’s out for now,” Jon said. Gerald was relieved, though his face barely changed. He plucked the nail out with one hand, and big puffs of straw came billowing down.

A big, scrappy nest landed near my feet. Gerald hopped down from his post, satisfied. The nest box was now ready for kestrels. Jon suggested that we return here with wood chips. “That’ll keep the eggs from rolling around,” he explained.

Jon, who worked at a nature center nearby, has visited dozens of farms and has set up nest boxes on many of them. He and another birder have hoisted up 100 boxes over time. As we walked down the hill, I asked him about this work. Jon pointed east along the valley. “There’s a nest box over on the Peachey Farm,” he said, marking a mile away. “Right over there.” I squinted. All I could see was grass.

Later, after Jon had headed home, Gerald and I carried hoes to the onion patch. We were hoping to break up a thick crust formed by recent rain. We worked in a rhythm. As I was navigating a small onion tangle, Gerald paused and looked up. I followed his gaze: two shapes drifted above us in the sky. “Look at that,” Gerald said. “Kestrels.”

They flapped in the air. Small falcons, silent and beautiful. I could see the curve of their wings and a flash of pale belly against the sun. We watched them careen. It was a beautiful, sacred moment. I smiled.

The birds passed by. They followed the creek, heading west. We returned to the soil, crumbling its crust. We hoped next year, maybe they would fly home to stay.

Resources:

To learn about starting nest boxes, visit the Peregrine Fund, kestrel.peregrinefund.org/nest-monitoring. To watch young kestrels, visit the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s American Kestrel Cam Timeline.

Johanna Jackson (she) is a former environmental educator who works on a farm in Central PA. Her writing is available at forwardinfaithfulness.org/portfolio.