

Boxing Clever 2024

Wade Muggleton

Following on from my article in Worcestershire Record number 52 (Muggleton 2023), in which I shared my experiences with raptor nest boxes, I have continued to monitor the boxes and a 2024 update is presented here.

When it comes to watching any wildlife, or indeed interactions with nature, there is always that element of jeopardy, the unpredictable, the will they or won't they. Over winter Grey Squirrels *Sciurus carolinensis* seemed to do a good job of stuffing up my raptor boxes with sticks, so late winter involved getting the ladders out and having a clear out of the boxes. The Common Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* had been hanging around in the tree with their box in, as though perturbed by the lack of access to it caused by the Squirrel drey. So, I cleared out the sticks one lunchtime, and the kestrels had moved in by the following morning. Clearly they wanted the box but the squirrels' activity had prevented them from utilising it. With the camera already installed, we ran 200m of cable from the box to the barn, and with a car battery set up we were able to record the kestrels at the box. Lack of mains connection meant we could not have a continuous stream, but the car battery enabled snippets to be filmed when we were on site.

The kestrels were a huge success. A combination of good parenting and an abundance of voles from the long grass of our mob grazing system enabled them to raise and fledge five young; a fantastic result for us. Oddly in late summer the whole kestrel family seemed to disappear, and weeks went by without a single sighting. It is only now with autumn rolling in that I am again seeing one or two about. Are they the same pair or different birds? They are not ringed so we'll never know.



01. Kestrel eggs in the nest 20.05.2024. Wade Muggleton.



02. The female kestrel sitting tight with the nestlings. Wade Muggleton.



03. Mum's out hunting, chicks on their own. Wade Muggleton.



04. The kestrels fledged at the end of June. Wade Muggleton.

The Barn Owl pair was a rather different story, as they opted not to use the box with the camera in where last year they successfully raised three young. For 2024 they moved to a box with no camera in it in a woodland edge location. However, having a suitable area to view them from, we made a simple hide with camouflage netting, and spent a number of evenings watching the box entrance. Occasional activity suggested the owls might be on eggs and one bird, possibly the male, could be seen roosting in the daytime inside the box hole. Dusk observations often saw the pair emerge, but at quite variable times on different days. The regular returning with prey that would be expected if chicks were in the nest, was not evident and we were often beaten by the darkness which curtailed further viewing. So, we could not say if the Barn Owls did lay eggs or raise chicks this year and by late summer the owls had abandoned the box and pigeons had taken up residence.



05. The Barn Owls used one of the boxes but evidence of eggs and brood were inconclusive. Wade Muggleton.

As I said at the outset, watching nature is never straightforward: 2024 was a superb success story for the kestrels but possibly a disappointment for the Barn Owls. Based on the kestrels' success it is unlikely that food availability was an issue, so the Barn Owls will remain a mystery for now and we can only hope 2025 might see a more positive result. I will certainly be out with ladders cleaning the boxes in February and hoping both species approve of the real estate options I have provided for them.

I may have gone slightly over the top as on our 11 acres there are now three kestrel boxes and three Barn Owl boxes, but I wanted to give them maximum choice and opportunity to nest. Whilst it is highly unlikely that we would get more than one pair of each we are at least maximising their chances. Although, in his book *Seasons with the Kestrel*, Gordon Riddle (1991) discusses kestrel nesting density, and in one of his Scottish study areas multiple pairs nested in close proximity when food was plentiful. So, who knows?

It is a considered view of the Shropshire Kestrel Project that the lack of potential nest sites is a major obstacle to the species' spread, something that probably applies to many raptors (G. Thomas pers. comm.). I hope that in the simple act of putting up these boxes, I can in some small part assist these magnificent birds and I would urge others to put up raptor boxes at when/where appropriate, all opportunities.

If you are not into making your own boxes, then the Barn Owl Centre of Gloucestershire do a great range of raptor boxes with all profits going to the charity.

Acknowledgements

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References

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Images

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