

Eastern Screech Owl

In Pennsylvania, screech-owls are small gray or reddish owls with ear tufts. They are found along forested ridges, in farm woodlots, in orchards and in wooded stream corridors. Only about 8 inches high, they resemble a miniature version of the more common great horned owl. The nest box for this screech owls should be placed at least 10 feet high in a hardwood forest. Preferred habitat seems to be on the edge of woods, adjacent to fields or wetlands.

To prevent use by squirrels the box could be placed on a pole with a predator guard. Since the entrance hole is 3 inches in diameter, persistent starling control may be necessary. About 2 to 3 inches of woodchips should be placed in the bottom of the box.



Eastern screech owl by J. Dingel



American kestrel by J. Dingel

Caution

When conducting nest box checks, make sure the box is empty prior to reaching your hand inside. You can knock on the side of the nest box, try to look inside or use a digital camera to double check. Squirrels, owls and other critters often use nest boxes for cover and can cause quite a scare when balancing on a ladder!

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Hassinger, J. (2008) *Woodcrafting for Wildlife: Homes for Birds and Mammals* (rev., 4th Ed.) Collingdale, PA: Diane Publishing.



Kestrel Boxes



American kestrel by J. Dingel

American Kestrel

The American kestrel is our smallest falcon and is abundant in agricultural areas characterized by scattered woodlots, scattered trees, shelterbelts, meadows, highway rights-of-ways, pastures and hayfields. This species is valuable because of the large number of rodents and insects eaten. Kestrels are frequently seen sitting on powerlines along highways or hovering above grassy roadside ditches in search of their prey. An adult kestrel is about the size of a mourning dove.

Place the box along a fencerow between crop fields, in a meadow or in similar open country.



Manage and protect wildlife and their habitats while promoting hunting and trapping for current and future generations.



American kestrel by J. Dingel

Because kestrels hunt in open habitats, boxes should be placed in locations surrounded by at least 20 acres of open space. Place the box 10 to 15 feet high on a tree, utility pole, side of a barn or a sturdy post. Kestrels like a high perch near their box, so pick a site within 100 to 200 yards of utility wires or a large tree. The entrance should face south or east. The flight path to the entrance should be branch free. Cover the bottom of the box with 2 or 3 inches of wood shavings or pine needles.

In Pennsylvania, kestrel boxes should be ready for occupancy by mid-March. Starlings may be a persistent problem. Check boxes every other week to remove starling nesting material. Neither screech owls nor kestrels bring in nesting material. Occasional nest checks will generally not cause the kestrel to abandon the nest.

If raccoons, squirrels or other non-avian predators and competitors are a problem, place 3 feet of metal flashing under the box. This guard will prevent their climbing to the box.

You will be rewarded when you spot the first white, pinkish-white or cinnamon egg that is evenly covered with brown spots. Kestrels normally lay five such eggs.

Dealing with nesters:

Other species of birds sometimes nest in boxes erected for kestrels. This is especially true of the introduced European starling. Orienting a box with a southern exposure discourages starlings. If starlings are seen entering the box, inspect the box immediately and remove any nesting materials they may have added. It may take several visits to the box to dissuade these interlopers.

If starlings have already begun to lay eggs, remove the nesting material and destroy the eggs. Starling eggs are pale blue and are much smaller than kestrel eggs (1.1 x 0.8 inches versus 1.4 x 1.1 inches). Be careful, however, not to destroy the eggs of native screech owls and Eastern bluebirds, both of which are protected species. Screech owl eggs are pure white and nearly spherical. Bluebird eggs are similar to starling eggs, but smaller with a deeper, darker shade of blue [0.8 x 0.6 inches].

Kestrels sometime evict starlings from nest boxes. When this occurs, kestrels will lay their eggs directly on top of the starling's nest. Do not disturb such nests. Kestrels are capable of raising their young successfully in this situation.

Finally, squirrels can easily outcompete kestrels for nest boxes. To discourage squirrels, erect nest boxes at least 50 yards away from wooded areas.



saw-whet owl by J. Kosack

Saw-whet Owl

The tiny Northern saw-whet owl is Pennsylvania's smallest owl, barely as large as a robin. It does not have ear tufts like the screech owl. It is seldom seen, but more common than formerly believed.

Preferred habitats include either coniferous or deciduous forests, mixed stands of conifers and hardwoods, woodlots and swamps. During breeding season, this species is found in boreal wooded bogs that have stands of evergreens like hemlock and spruce. Saw-whet owls will use the same type of nest box as Northern screech-owls.

Saw-whet owl nests are usually quite high, 14 or more feet off the ground. Nest boxes should be placed in live, mature conifers. Areas near water may be preferred. Add 2 to 3 inches of wood chips to the bottom of the box.



starling, sialis.org

kestrel, B. Brown

screech owl, L. Shucker