American Kestrel Nest Survey NYC - Issue #9 (2010)

NYC Kestrels are sitting on Eggs (most but not all pairs)

In this issue we feature information about the history of the English House Sparrow in New York City - and some first-hand observations about kestrels and sparrows on busy NYC streets. (See Deborah Allen's photo below.)

Dr. William Hyman sent us this link to a webcam of a nesting pair of Eurasian (Common) Kestrels (*Falco tinnunculus*) in Israel. Live young are clearly visible (when mom isn't sitting on them):

http://video.tau.ac.il/General/birds/2010/Nir_David_f.html

For information about urban raptors, see:

http://www.theworld.org/2010/04/27/protecting-beijings-raptors/ (= Raptors in Beijing). If you can properly navigate your web browser through that story, you can also track down Dr. David Bird discussing urban raptors...

Above: Kestrels are not called Sparrow Hawks for nothing (Part Dos)! This adult female kestrel is trying to capture a House Sparrow that had just entered its nest on Central Park West and 85th street in June 2009. House Sparrows nest in such structures throughout the city - and are the keystone prey species for kestrels here in Gotham. See top page 2 for Susan Choi’s observations that explain what Deborah Allen has photographed. See also pages 10-13 of this Newsletter for the early history of this sparrow in North America.
DATE: Sunday, 7 May 2000
SUBJECT: American Kestrel Tale (Brooklyn)
REPORTED BY: "susan m choi"

You know those horizontal pieces of pipe at the top of the traffic light poles, the ones sparrows like to nest in and are popping in and out of all the time [see photo bottom page 1]? Over the weekend we saw a male kestrel clinging to the end of one such, at the corner of union and 8th ave in park slope (Brooklyn), and literally trying to yank forth a meal for himself. in the end he left empty-clawed, but it was a dramatic spectacle, and smack in the middle of busy weekend pedestrian and wheeled traffic. - susan choi

[For more info on English House Sparrows in NYC, see pages 10-13]

From: Daryl Giampieri
Subject: West Village Kestrels (Manhattan)
Date: April 22 (Thursday)

HI Bob,

I finally found the little devil. Only because one early morning he chased away a Hawk. Since then I spotted him on the roof in two places on top of the buildings at West Houston and Varick St. or King Street and West Houston. [See bottom page 7 for - what we believe is - the discovery of the nest site of these kestrels by Jennifer Matthews.]

Daryl

From: Nancy Baker
Subject: Kestrels Upper West Side
Date: April 26th (Monday)

I think I saw a kestrel while sitting in my 3rd floor brownstone garden on West 81st Street. At first I thought it was a red-tailed hawk because the tail was fanned out and reddish. But it was much too small. I heard a screech and looked up to find a mourning dove escaping attack. The dove had been sitting on a railing and seemed to get away, though the attacker pursued with a mouthful of feathers. I'm no bird expert, but this seems closest when I look at my old Birds of North America.

I'm between Columbus and Amsterdam, nearer to Columbus. Probably it was a Zabars parent!

Nancy Baker
From: Mike DiPrima  
Subject: Queen's Kestrels (Jackson Heights)  
Date: April 26 (Monday Night) 

and fyi mine have not been heard since Easter (4 April) 

not yet anyway 

[But be aware: Sometimes kestrels will nest for 2-3 years at a location and then disappear forever...without a trace nor any hint of what made them disappear/abandon/die.] 

Above: Arrow shows the nest cornice of the Brooklyn Bridge kestrels watched over so well by Shelley Campbell - see page 8 for more info. This kestrel nest fledged 5 young in 2008 - all females. The photograph was taken from the Brooklyn Bridge walkway looking south toward Lower Manhattan in May 2008. In that year, Peregrine Falcons nested on the Brooklyn Bridge (about 100 meters to my left (= east), and also at 55 Water Street (the dark green building at the far left of the photo) overlooking the East River. Unfortunately, this year Ms. Campbell has seen scaffolding erected on the front of the kestrel nest building - and likely this will force the kestrels to abandon their eggs (if they are already nesting), or re-locate to another building. This is an all too common occurrence in NYC for kestrels - building repairs that result in permanent loss of nesting habitat. At another kestrel nest site in Manhattan where the building was "repaired" in 2008 we placed a nest box hoping to entice the kestrels to remain and nest adjacent to their former nest. However the kestrels moved (2009) a couple of blocks away and used a different cornice (bracket) to nest in. Somehow, we have to establish a balance between what landlords need to do to buildings, and the needs of kestrels in NYC. Also, local organizations including the Wildlife Conservation Society and American Museum of Natural History have to take an active interest in local wildlife...
From: Lou Ianniello  
Subject: Bronx kestrel sighting  
Date: April 27 (Tuesday)

Hi Bob,

Hope you are doing well. Thought you would like to know that I photographed a [male] kestrel in the playground behind my school. He then headed down the block after some starlings. This was on Blackrock and Virginia Avenues: [http://www.city-data.com/school/ps-119.html](http://www.city-data.com/school/ps-119.html) and [http://74.213.164.31/parks/X205/](http://74.213.164.31/parks/X205/)

All the best,

Lou Ianniello

[Thanks Lou - always great to get info from our home borough - Des Bronx, pronounced like Des Moines. Nice male kestrel by the way - I can guarantee that there is a nest nearby.]

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**Photo Above by Lou Ianniello:** adult male Kestrel near the Parkchester section of the Bronx. During winter, two adult kestrels were regularly observed just to the north of the #6 Train (Pelham Bay Local) - specifically the Elevated Parkchester IRT #6 stop. This pair has been in that area for two years at least - they nest close to Parkchester- about 10 blocks from where Lou Ianniello teaches. Thanks Lou from your fiend, Bob.
From: Jeffrey Kollbrunner  
Subject: Queens Kestrels  
Date: April 28 (Wednesday)

I know we have a number of Kestrels in the Briarwood, Kew Gardens region as I've seen a pair near Jamaica Hospital and Kew Gardens Road. I'm also aware of a pair near Queens Blvd by the Interboro. I haven't been able to find their nests and I'd like to add some Kestrel images to my Raptors portfolio. Can you possibly guide me to some nest locations in the Queens area especially if you are aware of some in the region or surrounding areas I mentioned. Otherwise, anyplace in Queens would be great. If you are not aware of the two locations I mentioned, I'm still going to search for their nests. If I find them I'll keep you posted.

All the best, Jeff  
www.JKNatureGallery.com

From: Leo  
Subject: American Kestrel in Long Island City (Queens)  
Date: May 5 (Wednesday)

I was jogging from Greenpoint to Astoria and spotted one in Jackson Ave. Long Island City by the 21st stop to the G: elegantly overseeing on top of a light post. Being a fan of Falconiforms I was excited, and found your site :)

Leo

From: David Schenfeld  
Subject: Re: American Kestrel in Long Island City (Queens)  
Date: May 5 (Thursday)

I am in the tall Citibank building at court square right above the G train. I have seen kestrels flying by out of my window several times in the past few weeks. I have never seen them fly in the direction of the known nest in LIC so I am wondering if there is another pair near the Court Square station.

I suspected a nest around the 'Citiwide' self storage warehouse by the courthouse in LIC but I am not sure. I do better spotting birds when someone tells me where they are :)  

David Schenfeld

From: Louise Weinberg  
Subject: RE: American Kestrel in Long Island City (Quens)  
Date: May 6 (Thursday)

I am also wondering if there is another nesting pair other than the Able Steel group who I see them from my window almost every day -- especially the male. I have never seen them fly off in that direction either towards the east.

When I get another minute, I'll send some nice feeding shots when they came to the roof right outside my apartment.

Best,

Louise
From: Dennis Edge  
Subject: Nesting Kestrels in Lower Manhattan  
Date: April 29 (Thursday)

Hi Bob,

I have Kestrel news. There is a nesting pair at Mercer and Bleecker Streets. Also, a pair is nesting at 9th Street and Avenue C across from 9th St. Community Garden. It is the same place you showed me in 2008. There are nesting Kestrels in Chinatown but my friend is keeping their location to himself for now. I'm finding the migration really slow so far, how about you?

Dennis

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From: Laura Meyers  
Subject: 9th street kestrels  
Date: May 5

Thanks for this email. I keep looking in the same spots as last year and so far have not seen them. I will certainly let you know if I do spot them. All is well on this end.

Above: Arrow shows the nest cornice of the East 9th street kestrels watched over so well by Laura Meyers, Anita Randolfi, and Aida. This photograph was taken from Laura (and Alan's) coop, a couple of blocks north... east is to the left. The Lower East Side is a stronghold for nesting kestrels because of the many 19th century buildings that have cornices in various states of disrepair. Also, there are many small community gardens that are wonderful for nesting English House Sparrows = the big willow tree that grows in the center of this garden. Here can be found an abundance of sparrows and starlings that kestrels chase.
From: Serena Altschul
To: Robert DeCandido PhD <rdcny@earthlink.net>
Subject: Re: Kestrel nests Lower Manhattan
Date: April 29 (Thursday Night)

They are on my water tower every day. I have photos. There are at least two making the rounds in my neighborhood. Crosby btwn Broome and Spring.

Serena
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From: Serena Altschul
Subject: Re: Kestrel nests Lower Manhattan
Date: May 1 (Saturday)

I believe 2 Kestrels were mating outside my soho/nolita window yesterday. Shall I send the footage? You will need Quicktime Player. I also have lots of new photos. I will send a link to those shortly with username/password.

Serena

Photos: http://gallery.me.com/saltschul#100055&view=grid&bgcolor=black&sel=7

Username: kestrels2010
Password: kestrel

From: Jennifer Mathews
Subject: Kestrel Nest, West Village (Manhattan)
Date: May 4, 2010 (Tuesday)

I don't know if anyone has reported this nest, but I "found" one on Lafayette btw Kenmare and Broome on the west side of the street in the cornice over the left hand side of the fire escape. I saw both the male and female. Very exciting and not too hard. Here is a crappy phone picture. I'll go back tomorrow with my real camera for some pictures. I spotted the nest after roaming around the block looking for the "Crosby St" pair. I'm so happy!

[See Jennifer's photos below of the nest building (left) and nest bracket (right) at the nest she found! Thanks Jen - you done magnifico.]
From: Beth Goffe  
Subject: Possible kestrel sighting  
Date: May 1, 2010 (Saturday)

I spotted a falcon flying over the City College campus at 140th St. This morning (Saturday). I can't be sure that this was one of the pair I watched nest last year at W. 131st St. (I saw nothing at both nest sites) but I'm taking it as a hopeful sign! Beth

From: Shelley Campbell  
Subject: Kestrels - Brooklyn Bridge area  
Date: May 1 (Saturday)

Hi. I have been keeping an eye on the Kestrel's nest at 248 Front Street in the South Street Seaport this Spring. I have not seen any activity until today, when I was walking my dog this morning. I saw a large bird fly into the cavity at the South corner of the roof. Sadly, the building has put up scaffolding and netting for repairs to the building. I'm sure the nest is in harm's way.

This scaffolding has been put up in the last few weeks. The building next door which is an empty lot separating the two buildings has had scaffolding up for the last three months. They are pointing the entire North brick wall. I have kept my eye on the cornice because of Spring, but definitely saw a large bird, probably a Kestrel fly into the hole yesterday morning. I did write an e mail to the Best Western Seaport Inn regarding the cornice, but have not heard back yet. Someone told me, maybe you, that the owner of the hotel, also owned 248 Front Street. Keep you posted if I hear of any more info regarding the birds. shelley

Photo Above: American Kestrels nested here in 2008-09 (at least), near the Brooklyn Bridge (behind the photographer). See page 3 (bottom) for an alternate view of this nest building. As 19th century NYC buildings and cornices are repaired, we are eliminating the nest sites of American Kestrels. It is a problem that can be solved, but it will take participation of local organizations. We can have safe, repaired buildings and nesting kestrels too...getting building owners interested in local kestrels is the key part.
From: Maggie  
Subject: Amsterdam Avenue Kestrels (Manhattan)  
Date: May 6 (Thursday)  

I saw my Kestrel this morning!! He made a pit stop on my fire escape while feeding "the love of his life". My son and I were looking out to see him and Boy!! he swarmed really close and showed his orange. This was beautiful and would have been the ultimate shot If I had my cam.: ( He is perching across my window on the other roof like he did last year. I'll be checking all those last year perches to find him. Where do I check for your C.P. birding schedules?

Regards

Maggie

[When not doing kestrel and other raptor research (owls!) here in NYC, we can be found in Thailand - doing raptor migration research for the Thai government at a globally significant watch site - at least 24 raptor species have been seen in migration there, as well as numerous other bird species. However, we are New Yorkers, and Deborah Allen and I run regularly scheduled bird walks in NYC, see: www.BirdingBob.com]

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From: Eric Powers  
Subject: 96th Street Kestrels (Manhattan)  
Date: May 7, 2010 (Friday)  

I just wanted to say thank you for sending me the Kestrel Newsletters and your papers/news on E Screech Owls. Fascinating! I thought moving into Manhattan was going to be mostly devoid of wildlife and the news of raptors in the area has me titillated to be here. Especially now since I have found the Kestrel nest on the corner of W. 96th St and Broadway...in the cornices of the building...in view from my bedroom window no less!! Fortune has surely smiled on this biologist! I'm trying to get in touch with the building owner across the street from the kestrels to allow me roof access so I can photograph the nest without disturbing the adults.

As for the screech owl and kestrel nest boxes, I see that these would just serve the squirrels of the Park. There MUST be a squirrel excluder device out there somewhere...

Keep your newsletters coming! Great job.

Sincerely,

Eric Powers

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American Kestrel Nest - West 96th Street and Broadway  
View Looking North - Nest Faces 96th Street
Many kinds of foreign birds have been introduced into the United States with the hope of having them become acclimated to their new surroundings. In many cases this action was taken by persons who doubtless were actuated by the desire to have around them certain forms of bird-life that they had been accustomed to see and enjoy about their European homes before migrating to these shores.

Linnets, Bullfinches, Skylarks, and many other birds, interesting on account either of their singing, or of the striking character of their plumage, have been liberated in the United States and Canada. Game-birds, especially Hungarian Partridges, the little European Quail, and various species of Pheasants go to swell the list of foreign birds that have been brought here to mingle with our native bird-population. As a rule these imported species did not thrive in their new surroundings, and after a short time were seen no more.

The most striking exception to this rule has been the House Sparrow of Europe, which in this country has acquired the incorrect title of "English" Sparrow. The first importation of these birds appears to have been made in the year of 1850, by the directors of the Brooklyn Institute. Eight pairs were that year liberated in Brooklyn, New York. In a bulletin on the English Sparrow, issued by the Department of Agriculture in 1889, a statement by the Hon. Nicholas Pike is quoted, in which he gives an account of this early attempt to naturalize English Sparrows in this country. He writes: "It was not till 1850 that the first eight pairs were brought from England to the Brooklyn Institute, of which I was then a director. We built a large cage for them, and cared for them during the winter months. Early in the spring of 1851 they were liberated, but they did not thrive.
"In 1852 a committee of members of the Institute was chosen for the re-introduction of these birds, of which I was chairman. Over $200 was subscribed for expenses. I went to England in 1852, on my way to the consul-generalship of Portugal. On my arrival in Liverpool I gave the order for a large lot of Sparrows and song-birds to be purchased at once. They were shipped on board the steamship 'Europa,' if I am not mistaken, in charge of an officer of the ship. Fifty Sparrows were let loose at the Narrows, according to instructions, and the rest on arrival were placed in the tower of Greenwood Cemetery chapel. They did not do well, so were removed to the house of Mr. John Hooper, one of the committee, who offered to take care of them during the winter.

"In the spring of 1853 they were all let loose in the grounds of Greenwood Cemetery, and a man hired to watch them. They did well and multiplied, and I have original notes taken from time to time of their increase and colonization over our great country."

This appears to have been only the first of many importations that followed. For example, Colonel William Rhodes, of Quebec, Canada, introduced Sparrows at Portland, Maine, in 1854. Other men brought some to Peace Dale, Rhode Island, in 1858. In 1860 twelve birds were liberated in Madison Square, New York City; and four years later they were introduced into Central Park.

In 1866, 200 were set free in Union Park, New York City. Forty pairs were brought to New Haven, Connecticut in 1867. Twenty Sparrows were turned loose in Boston Common in 1868. In 1869 the City Government of Philadelphia bought over one thousand Sparrows. In the same year twenty pairs were brought to Cleveland, Ohio, and sixty-six pairs were taken from New York to Cincinnati. Shortly after this they were introduced in San Francisco. It will be seen therefore from the above records, which are not at all complete, that the present population of English Sparrows did not develop in this country from a single importation, as has sometimes been stated.

Their appearance seems to have been hailed with delight by the people of the country generally, for many records tend to show that after they once became fairly well established in the East, there sprang up a regular Sparrow craze, for the birds were captured and taken to scores, if not hundreds, of places in different parts of the country.

Not only were they distributed artificially, but the birds also spread rapidly by their own initiative. Their progress was made chiefly along the highways, where the droppings of horses furnished an abundant supply of half-digested grain, and along the railroads where the grain-cars, particularly in autumn, were continually scattering food along the right-of-way. At the present time there are comparatively few communities in the United States or in southern Canada where the English Sparrow is not well known, and probably it is the most numerous species of bird in North America. It is chiefly a bird of the cities and towns, and is usually not found in abundance in the thinly populated parts of the country. In the autumn, however, when the Sparrows are most numerous, owing to the recently reared broods, and in cities where the Sparrow population is already at its maximum, many of these birds are naturally forced out of the cities and towns in quest of food. In no way does the English Sparrow show its fondness for living near human habitations more than in its nesting-habits. Unlike other Sparrows, it rarely, if ever, constructs its nest in woods, thickets, or fields at any considerable distance from a house.

During the breeding-season the birds swarm in the towns and cities and there, in crevices about buildings, in water-spouts, or in boxes put up for the convenience of other birds, it makes its home. The hollows of trees are frequently used for this purpose. When such nesting-sites are no longer available, owing to overcrowding, they will build bulky, covered, and ill-looking nests among the branches of shade trees. The nesting material used consists of straw, grass, twigs, rags, fragments of paper, or feathers; in fact, almost any substance that may easily be carried seems to be regarded by these birds as suitable material for nest-making.

The eggs are spotted, and usually range in number from four to six. Two or more broods are often reared in a
season. The Sparrow is extremely prolific, and one evidence of its wonderful ability to avoid dangers and thrive is shown in the fact that in large cities, where destructive natural enemies are reduced to a minimum, albinism has become more and more noticeable. I have observed here in New York City in recent years that the number of Sparrows showing white feathers in the wings or on the body has apparently increased. If these unusually marked birds lived in the country they would, of course, be shining marks for predatory enemies.

While primarily a seed-eater by nature, the English Sparrow is nevertheless quite omnivorous in its food-habits, and it annually destroys many insects. I recall some years ago talking with two farmers in Onslow County, North Carolina, who were lamenting the fact that the law did not protect the English Sparrow, for they stated that these birds were among the most valuable species on their farms because of their great fondness for the caterpillars that infested their tobacco plants.

An observer in the United States Department of Agriculture recently found that in Utah these Sparrows were feeding their young largely on the cutworms and other insects that were then a scourge to the alfalfa fields of northern Utah. Other observers in various parts of the country have pointed to instances where the English Sparrow was of decided economic value. These cases, however, appear to be comparatively isolated ones, and are regarded by our agricultural experts in Washington as being greatly overbalanced by the injury these birds do to the general interests of mankind. Most persons who have tried to cultivate gardens or small fruits in the neighborhood of towns or cities are ready to testify to the annoyance they have experienced by English Sparrows eating tender plants, such as new peas and young lettuce, as well as by the destruction of such fruits as cherries, pears, grapes, and peaches. They also frequently destroy buds and flowers.

The United States Department of Agriculture scientifically investigated the contents of the stomachs of a large number of English Sparrows, and reported that aside from the destruction of weed-seeds, very little is to be said in the English Sparrow's favor. In reference to the insects destroyed this statement is made: "Out of five hundred and fifty-two stomachs inspected by the Biological Survey, forty-seven contained noxious insects, fifty held beneficial insects, and thirty-one contained insects of little or no importance."

There is a widespread feeling that the country would be better off if the English Sparrow had never been brought here. This sentiment against this bird, whether justified or not, has arisen because of the annoyance it gives to gardeners and fruit-growers; its tendency to destroy the nests of small native birds and thus drive them out of our towns; the loss caused by fires due to the nests placed about buildings catching sparks; its uncleanly habits spoiling sculptures on the facades of buildings; its noisy chatter about the house and yard where once the songs of other birds were heard, to say nothing of the petulant calling and fighting in the early morning heard about bedroom windows where late risers are taking their "beauty sleeps."

Resentment against the bird is reflected in the laws of our country, for in no state in the Union is the English Sparrow protected by statute. Every little while there are discussions in the public press about starting "Sparrow-wars" with a view to exterminating these birds. Now and then we hear of some community's efforts looking to this end. Such attempts, however, have virtually been futile, as the English Sparrow can take care of itself so successfully that only by continuous warfare against them, year after year, can their numbers be kept down in any particular community.

Sometimes the experiment is made of offering a bounty on the heads of Sparrows. One objection to this procedure is that inexperienced persons, who are not able to distinguish between the English Sparrow and one or another of our native Sparrows, immediately become active in such a campaign, and our native birds suffer as a result. Within the past month an agent of this Association visited a western town where a bounty was being paid on dead English Sparrows. This agent examined the dead birds brought in during three days, and found that only one out of every eleven birds brought in, on all of which the bounty appears to have been paid, were English Sparrows; the others were all useful native birds.
"What shall we do with the English Sparrow?" is a question which this Association is probably asked once a day on an average throughout the year. I confess my inability to answer this question. The Department of Agriculture at Washington has attempted to answer it by issuing bulletins advising people to poison and trap the birds. Whether this course is wise, it may at least be said that all such attempts in a public way instantly produce strong opposition by many hundreds of men and women who, perhaps in lieu of more interesting bird-neighbors, regard with pleasure the presence of the English Sparrows, and often feed them upon their window-sills, or provide boxes for their accommodation.

Bird-Lore 19(1): 60-63 (January-February, 1917)
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Kestrels - International

Subject: [RaptorBiology] current paper on urban Common Kestrels in Warsaw Poland
Date: Wed, 25 Jul 2001
From: "stan moore" <hawkman11@hotmail.com>

Friends --

I am at the BioScience Library in Berkeley and have in front of me Acta Ornithologica, an ornithological publication of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. The issue I have is Volume 35, No. 2, dated Winter 2000, and I would like to share the abstract from the following paper:

"Can food caching increase frequency of chicks' feeding in urban Kestrels Falco tinnunculus?" by Lukasz Rejt, et al.

Abstract: "Continuous video camera observations of the Kestrel's nest situated on a building within the city centre showed presence of a surplus of prey (mainly untouched sparrows and voles) stored in the nest and its close vicinity. During the first three weeks of the nestling period, chicks were fed this prey, and the frequency of feedings was higher than the frequency of prey delivery. Food storage was also observed in some other nesting places of Warsaw krestels.

Daily pattern of prey deliveries observed in Warsaw did not differ significantly from the available data on Kestrels inhabiting an open landscape."
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Finally, and we hope to have more to report on this in the coming weeks, American Kestrels have now been reported to be foraging at night in three different places. Here in NYC, Dr. Andrew Farnsworth reported to us that he has seen krestels chasing insects at night at the new Yankee Stadium. In the link to the web discussion about urban raptors referenced on page 1, Dr. David Bird writes, "I have seen American krestels, a smaller cousin, catching flying insects in the lights of the Olympic Stadium in Montreal during an Expos baseball game." And finally, our own Bill C. Heck was watching baseball highlights on Thursday night 6 May 2010. He was amazed to hear the commentators talking about a bird chasing moths at night during the ball game. Next, the camera zoomed in on an American Kestrel male eating a moth at night....Each of these observations is a discovery new to science....!

Robert DeCandido PhD
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJUnX1En5TM&feature=related