



Photo: Michael Groves

Five Beautiful Kestrel Chicks 2013

# Kestrel Highways Project 2013 Report

*Emily Joáchim reports back on an unusual season for the kestrels that make up one of our longest running research projects.*

It was the coldest March for fifty years and heavy snowfall and ice, combined with strong winds, affected much of the UK for several weeks. As a result, less mammalian prey was available and accessible to kestrels and it is likely that individuals further diminished their already low fat reserves during this exceptionally cold weather.

Since females need to acquire enough fat reserves for egg laying and incubation, it was predicted that fewer kestrels would be 'in condition' for breeding during 2013, the onset of breeding would be delayed and fewer young would be raised per nesting attempt.

In earnest, the eight Kestrel Highway Project sub-teams started to check their nest boxes from mid April and initially, most of the checked boxes were devoid of kestrel activity, which was unusual and worrying. These included boxes which had been occu-

ried by kestrels in previous years and was indicative that females were not yet in sufficient condition for breeding and/or individuals had perished during the cold winter.

Second round box checks were carried out between late April and early May and the Hawk and Owl Trust is pleased to report that 13 kestrel pairs used Project nest boxes this year. Whilst this was 50 % less

than the previous year, the 2013 results are not comparable, as the same numbers of Kestrel Highway boxes were available for reoccupancy/uptake, but the unusually cold early Spring weather combined with low food availability, prevented kestrels from breeding.



Photo: Michael Groves

Room With a View... and What a View It Is!

Typically, it is not uncommon for kestrels to start breeding by mid April; this season it was early May, which was approximately three weeks later than most years.

Despite this delay, a total of 40 chicks were known to have survived to ringing age, with an average brood size of 3.08 chicks per nesting attempt. This is lower than the 'average' breeding season, which would range between 3.5 and 4.0 chicks.

Near the A303 in Wiltshire, seven out of the 30 nest boxes were occupied by breeding kestrel; all clutches hatched and 22 chicks were ringed. Six of these boxes were also occupied by kestrel during 2012.

In Somerset, three out of the 34 nest boxes installed near the A38 and A370 were re-occupied by breeding kestrel during 2013; all of these breeding attempts were successful and 12 chicks were ringed.

In Norfolk, two out of the 20 nest boxes sited near the A148 were occupied during 2013; both attempts were successful and five chicks were ringed. One of these boxes was also used during 2012. Unfortunately, a dead kestrel was found close to a previously occupied box.

In Gloucestershire, kestrels used one of the 36 checked boxes sited close to the A38, B4058 and A420 roads; only one chick was ringed. In Scotland, nil boxes were used near the A75, which was unfortunate, as two boxes were used during 2012. Kestrels did not occupy nest boxes sited close to A40 and A465 in Wales, the A24 in Sussex nor the A171 and B1416 in Yorkshire, despite adding internal nesting material.

As expected, fewer kestrels did breed in the Kestrel Highways

Photo: Richard Clayton



Nigel Lewis & Emily Joachim Checking Kestrel Chicks

Photo: Michael Groves



One of the Highway Teams in Action

Photo: Michael Groves



A Healthy Kestrel Chick In The Hand

nest boxes during 2013, breeding was delayed and fewer young were raised per nesting attempt. Several sub-teams reported seeing kestrels in close proximity to previously used nest boxes, so it is hopeful that box occupancy rates will recover and improve next year.

As stressed before, it can take several years for a box to be used and whilst nest site availability is incredibly important, there are many other factors that influence if a site is used or reused by kestrels. Unfortunately, this year, it appears that the cold weather limited food availability to kestrels, which is why box occupancy uptake was comprised this year.

Don't forget, you can now report sightings of kestrels via the Hawk and Owl Trust website under the 'Report a Kestrel Highways Project Sighting' subsection.

You can learn more about the Project via our website, Nigel Lewis' (Project Coordinator) talk at the Trust's members' weekend (20 - 21 October 2013) and a report, which will be completed by Emily Joáchim later on this year.

### Thank You's

Once again, so many volunteers have generously donated their time in support of this project.

In particular: **Nigel Lewis** (Wiltshire), **Barrie Watson** (Sussex), **Barry Gray** (Somerset), **Chris Hansell** (Yorkshire), **Denise Foster** (Wales), **Tom Greenaway** (Scotland), **Phil Littler** (Norfolk) and **Stuart Robson** (Gloucestershire).

This project has concluded its sixth year and it continues to be supported by **Luc Hoffman**.