

SUCCESSFULLY PROTECTING A NORTHERN HARRIER NEST ON A MOWED FIELD.

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While conducting checks of the 130 American Kestrel nest boxes we put up in eastern St. Lawrence and western Franklin counties, we observed an adult female Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) hunting a field in the Town of Dickinson (Franklin Co.). We had seen harriers in this area in previous years, and had asked the farm owner, Keith Prosper, to please try to avoid any harrier nests during his haying operations. The next day (16 Jul) Mr. Prosper contacted us and stated that another farmer, Webby Brown, had just found a harrier nest while haying his fields.

We immediately went to speak to Mr. Brown who gave us directions to the nest and permission to protect the chicks from predators by erecting a fence around it. We found 4 chicks, 3 females and 1 male, which we estimated to be 10 to 14 days old. The sex of each bird was determined by examining the color of the eyes, a technique that Manske learned when working on Dr. Francis Hamerstrom's 25-year Northern Harrier study in central Wisconsin.

The field had been completely mowed and the hay would be baled the next day. With no cover, the chicks stood out from a distance and we were worried that they would be eaten by mammalian predators. Originally, we had planned to move the chicks by increments to the tall grass at the edge of the field but after further consideration we decided that there was not enough cover and that we would lead predators right to the chicks. We left after completely surrounding the chicks with mothballs and clumps of mown hay. The mothballs were used to cover our scent and reduce the chance that a mammalian predator would follow our trail to the nest.

Rain forced Mr. Brown to wait a day before baling his hay and the delay gave us sufficient time to create an enclosure around the chicks. We made the enclosure with six metal fence posts and 1 inch chicken wire that stretched from the ground to a height of four (4) feet.. Hay was pushed along the bottom edge of the fence and more mothballs were spread around the enclosure. On 22 Jul, we checked on the chicks and observed that their flight feathers were at least halfway grown. Food pellets could be seen in the enclosure and all the chicks appeared to have full crops. Both adults could be seen in the distance as we inspected the enclosure. Mr. Brown was baling the hay at this point and reported that he had flushed the adult female from within the enclosure. On 25 Jul, the chicks were visibly larger and prey remains were found inside and outside the enclosure. Again, the chicks appeared to have

full crops. One end of the wire fence appeared to have been pulled up, so we decided to secure the wire with tent stakes.

On 27 Jul, Lee Harper, one of the R6 Regional Editors, and his wife Laurie, accompanied Manske to the nest. They checked on the chicks and further secured the bottom of the fence to the ground with a dozen tent stakes. Both adults could be seen at various distances from us while we worked on the fence. Upon leaving, we sprinkled more mothballs around the enclosure and left three freshly killed mice within the enclosure.

Finally, on 7 Aug, one of the female chicks flushed from the enclosure and perched in a small tree 50 meters to the north. A second female flushed from outside the enclosure and joined its sibling in the tree. The male was still in the enclosure and there was no sign of the other female. We immediately took the enclosure down and left the area. The grass was now sufficiently tall enough to conceal the chicks and we estimated that the male was within a day or two from fledging.

Northern Harrier nests are often destroyed by agricultural machinery. Management guidelines recommend that farmers be encouraged to delay haying until harrier young have fledged. In this case, the farmers were aware of our interest in harriers and knew that harriers are a "Threatened" species in New York State.

Starting in 2004, Manske intends to conduct regular Northern Harrier surveys in the area and enlist other farmers to help with harrier conservation efforts. We would like to thank Keith Prosper and Webby Brown for their concern and cooperation, and for being careful not to strike the harrier chicks during their haying operations. We would also like to thank the many farmers and other landowners who have graciously permitted us to put up and monitor 130 American Kestrel boxes on their properties.

