

“BARN OWLS – THE POCKET GOPHER’S BIGGEST WORRY”

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****** NOTE: Fresno Wildlife Rehabilitation Service’s “Barn Owls In the Classroom” program is the only one of its kind in the U.S. and has the only permit through the U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Fish & Wildlife Service for this type of project.**

Since 1992, Fresno area teachers who are volunteers with Fresno Wildlife Rehabilitation Service (FWRS) have been raising Barn Owls in their classrooms for release on farm and ranch properties. The project began when FWRS had received 200 orphaned Barn Owls during one spring season. With so many “beaks” to feed, it was thought that if the organization could have classes of students help with raising the owlets it might ease the burden a bit. Now, once the young owls come in and are examined, stabilized and determined to be healthy, they are placed with FWRS volunteers who are credentialed teachers and they raise the young birds in the classrooms, with the help of the students.

Once the owlets begin to want to fly, they are placed into a flight cage and there the birds become acclimated to outdoor temperatures and can practice flying and even hunting. After the birds have been in the flight cage for about 3 weeks they are caught and banded with a Federal ID band, then the birds are released. It is the responsibility of the person, where the flight cage is located, to nightly put food on the roof of the cage for the young and inexperienced owls, thereby allowing the young birds to get food while their hunting skills are being practiced and finely honed enough for them to catch their own food, mainly rodents such as gophers.

Over the next few weeks, the owls return less often until none return. This method of release closely mimics the way the owls would have left their own original nests. Initially the parent owls continue to support the young owls with food, until that is no longer required.

Over the years hundreds and hundreds of Barn Owls have been released through the program. Each year the program’s success is, without a doubt, nothing short or amazing. More and more San Joaquin Valley farmers and growers put up Barn Owl boxes with the hope of attracting the gopher-killing owls to their property. Each year the owls continue to inhabit the boxes and then go about the nightly work of killing gophers. This is a totally win-win program; the children, teachers, owls and the farmers and growers all benefit and we as consumers benefit because the cost of rodenticides can be decreased thereby making our foods possibly less costly to produce. **IT IS A TRUE WIN-WIN SITUATION.**

Last year one of our volunteers created our first moveable flight cage. It is made out of an old cotton trailer and the sides were raised up higher and a roof was added. Aviary

netting was used to line all the sides and top. Perches and shelter are provided inside for the Barn Owls. Now farmers and ranchers can “rent” the flight cage to have it put on their property. FWRS can then put young Barn Owls into the cage and then they can be released on that farmer’s property. Hopefully the owls will stick around and set up their own nests in the boxes the following spring.

The way it directly affects the agricultural community is most vividly shown by some statistics that have been gathered by retired Merced teacher, Steve Simmons. In Steve’s information from 1997-1998, he stated that:

2 Adult Barn Owls X 48 Nest Boxes = 96 Barn Owls
3 Owlets Survive Per Box X 48 Nest Boxes = 144 Owlets

240 (Total Owls)
X 365 Days (Consume 1 Rodent/Day)

87,600 (Total Rodents Killed)
X 42 % (Gophers In Diet)

36,792 (Gophers Killed Per Yr.)
X 156 Grams (Average Weight Per Gopher)

5,739.552 (Total Grams)
Divided by 28.350 (Grams/1 Ounce)

202,453 (Total Ounces)
Divided by 16 Ounces (Per Pound)

12, 653 (Pounds of Gophers Consumed)
Or
6.3 (Tons of Gophers Killed & Consumed In One Year)

**** Steve Simmons can be contacted at simwoodduk@aol.com