Give A Hoot! 4-H – Owl Nesting Box Project

By Seralyn Colton, Lockwood 4-H

Seralyn Colton, a member of the Lockwood 4-H in Monterey County is organizing a Service Learning Project. A service learning project should benefit both the club and the community in some way. Sera’s project is called “Give A Hoot! 4-H” and is about building owl nesting boxes. Sera hopes to help local farmers, ranchers and vineyards by promoting natural pest control, and help 4-H members in Monterey County to learn more about the importance of ecology, by reducing habitat reduction of barn owls in these areas and empowering them to make a difference. Other birds of prey will attack and kill a barn owl, especially if they are vulnerable or easy to catch during the day.

Barn owls are known for nesting in man-made structures, not just barns, but also in other places, like the eaves of houses, grain silos, or in hollow trees. Many of their nesting sites are lost each year when the owls suffer from predation, starvation, or death.

Barn owls are strictly nocturnal, and have a distinctive heart-shaped face. Instead of the traditional “hoot,” barn owls have a unique hissing screech. There have been studies on the different sounds these owls make, and many distinct sounds have been identified with separate meanings

“Barn owls are great hunters and feed primarily on rodents,” Seralyn explains, “but they need three things to survive: (1) A safe place to raise their young, (2) a dry place to roost during the day, and (3) a good place to hunt nearby.” Owls prefer open spaces, where they can fly lower to the ground while hunting, and since they memorize their flight patterns, they need a safe flight path to and from the nest that does not include crossing well-travelled road ways, with large trucks or automobiles at all hours of the night.

Owl nesting boxes protect the nest from predators, keep the female and her owlets in a prime location for hunting, and help more owls survive to adulthood. While one owl, alone, may consume up to 6 rodents a night, a nesting pair with owlets may consume five to six times that amount! The male owl is the main hunter while the female cares for the nest and her young. If he dies, the nest will fail.

Interestingly, barn owls are built to locate the sound of their prey’s heartbeat – they can hear a mouse’s heartbeat and pinpoint its location almost a football field away! Not only are they amazing hunters, but their feathers are designed to give them ‘silent’ flight, so the prey never hear them coming. Lucky for the barn owls, because raising baby owls to adulthood is a big job!

Mama owls lay their eggs every two to three days, but they begin sitting on them immediately. Barn owls can lay between two and thirteen eggs in a single clutch, but the average is about six eggs at a time. Since the eggs are incubated immediately, the owlets in a single nest may vary quite a bit in size and age.

Barn owl populations in North America are suffering greatly due to habitat loss. When farmlands or open areas are converted into neighborhoods, the nesting and hunting grounds of these owls are destroyed. Owl nesting boxes help to reverse this trend, and provide successful nesting barn owl pairs with the ability to have second or even third clutches in a single year.

Seralyn Colton, through the Lockwood 4-H and the Monterey County 4-H Council has organized two workdays around Monterey County to provide opportunities for 4-H members and adult volunteers to assist in building the owl nesting boxes. For additional information on the work days and locations, please send an email to GiveAHoot4h@gmail.com.

In addition, the Wildlife Center of the SPCA is working together with this project to provide an educational outreach with a live raptor presentation. They admit over 2,500 animals for treatment and care each year. To learn more about the SPCA Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Center, please visit https://www.spcamc.org/wildlife/.

Sponsors were asked to help provide the building supplies and other workday expenses in advance, and will receive completed owl boxes to install in their chosen locations by December 31, 2018. Sponsors, volunteers, and 4-H members throughout Monterey County are welcome to attend any of the work day events, and encouraged to help Make a Difference.