



Home Available, Owls Welcome

by Peg Sullivan, UC Master Gardener

Attracting wildlife to our yard has always been my goal. It's delightful to spot a wide variety of butterflies, bees, birds, beneficial insects, and an occasional fox or two. While we like to have a balance in nature, some creatures were not as welcome, such as gophers, ground hogs, snakes, mice, and an occasional rat. Poison was never an option around our yard, so our cats were great "mousers" till they grew too old to hunt. A red shouldered hawk has also done his share of deterring the population of these unwelcome critters over the years in the garden too.

We benefit from having so many oak trees in our valley, where raptors can nest and hide. The large oak tree in our yard has housed many a nesting bird. In recent years, we watched a pair of red-shouldered hawks build a nest, raise 2 fledglings, and then vacate the nest. A barn owl decided to take over the nest. I was so excited to see one of these greatest winged hunters arrive! During those months when the owls were in residence, I discovered 3 ground squirrels, which were, unwisely, foraging for acorns under the oak tree and the watchful eye of the owl. Needless to say, theirs was a short visit.

Benefits of attracting owls: According to the Audubon Society, "researchers collected pellets of barn owls, analyzed them and kept records for many months. Results from this study showed that two parent owls and their six owlets ate 1,000 mice, shrews and rats during a three month period!" It's hard to imagine what the rodent population would be like if we didn't have raptors and owls on the look-out for a meal.

Safe at home: I learned that owls will often take over the abandoned nests of other large birds. Unfortunately, these nests take a beating from wind and weather, as well as from active young hawks as they ready themselves for their first flights. In the past few years, we have found 2 baby owls on the ground, which had fallen from the battered nest and had broken wings as they collided with the ground. Critter Creek Wildlife Station (see web link below) rescued them and restored them to their wild habitat. Both fledglings made full recoveries.

Building a better house: I wanted to learn how to make a safer nesting habitat to attract and protect owls. As we drove back and forth to the coast, we noticed bird boxes scattered in the grape orchards along both sides of the highway. They seemed like a good natural solution to keeping the orchard pests at bay. In my research, I found several owl box patterns and directions. Some are simple



designs using wood, while others are pre-fabricated plastic. All of them provide a clean-out door. A nesting box must be secured to a pole at least 10 feet high or attached to a spot high in a tree where predators cannot reach the babies (see resource links below). Thanks to my husband, we now have a box sitting high in our oak tree with a “welcome” sign at the front door. No visitors as yet, but we’ll keep watching.

Publications from University of California, Davis, the Audubon Society, and Critter Creek Wildlife station:

Owl box plans: http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/calraptor/local-assets/pdfs/Owl_Box.pdf

Owl nest plans: <http://getintobirds.audubon.org/build-screech-owl-box>

Critter Creek Wildlife station: <http://www.crittercreek.org/>

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