

Barn Owl Nest Boxes

Should You Install a Nest Box in Your Yard?

Manmade Barn Owl Boxes

Installing barn owl nest boxes at home in your in trees (or mounted on poles can provide very nice homes for barn owls and may also assist in rodent control efforts around your property. For “Barn Owl Box Design” click on:

<https://test.seaandsageaudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/BarnOwlNestBoxPlans.pdf>

Successful nest boxes can be both rewarding for us and helpful for owls and the environment, but they need to be installed with careful consideration and planning. If not installed correctly they can be disappointing, noisy, messy and/or harmful to the owls or other sensitive species.

Pest Control Benefits

Barn owls naturally nest and sometimes roost in cavities located in trees and cliffs. Although adult barn owls do not always stay inside the cavity year-round, a manmade nest box can be occupied quite regularly with owls and has the potential to keep barn owls nearby year-round. Barn owls are voracious consumers of small rodents, including introduced rats and mice. They adapt quite well to manmade boxes and will often raise their young in boxes, requiring the parent owls to catch 3- 5 (or more) rodents per day during the breeding season. Thus, one of the growing reasons for wanting a barn owl box at home is to help with pest control in a non-harmful manner. While even a breeding pair of owls will not completely eliminate rodent problems, when combined with other good pest management practices such as trapping and home fortification (an integrated approach) they can be quite helpful.



Installing a Barn Owl Box

Barn owl boxes work best when placed high in a tree or mounted on a high pole. In a tree the box should be hung from a strong horizontal branch on wires. The opening to the box needs to have a clear pathway for the owl(s) to enter and leave. The box should be hung so that it swings slightly to act as a deterrent to potential predators. It can also be mounted on a tall pole, but there are additional considerations, such as the pole won't provide shade and it can be hard to access the box for maintenance or cleaning. Whether in a tree or on a pole, the opening should not face strong afternoon or evening sun. The opening should also face away from your house and away from frequent human activities (the options quickly get limiting).

Photos provided by: Bruce Aird and Scott Thomas

Noise and Mess Considerations

Barn owls are loud, especially chicks, which are very loud at night. The box needs to be far from your house and far enough away from other homes to not bother your neighbors. The best placement options for barn owl nest boxes are large yards that back up to open spaces, such that the box is away from the house and also more accessible to foraging areas. And, there really should be other large trees nearby

The area below a barn owl nest can become quite messy. Barn owls defecate (white-wash) as they leave perches and cavities. They also cough up pellets (balls of indigestible matter such as hair and bone) below the nest. And, during nesting season uneaten portions of prey and whole rodents often drop to the ground, left to rot under the nest. You should be sure the box is located in an area that you don't mind getting messy.



Avoid Disturbances to Nesting Owls

Barn owls can adapt quite well to certain urban conditions, but they can also be easily disturbed, especially during the nesting season. If an occupied nest box is approached too closely or subject to loud noises the owls may flush (leave in a hurry) and may not return until after dark, even when they have eggs or chicks. This can be very dangerous for an owl that is not equipped well to deal with diurnal predators such as hawks and it can be detrimental to the success of nest if the owl leaves eggs or chicks unattended. The box needs to be located such that it is not likely to be approached during the day and high enough (30feet plus) to provide a sense of security for the owl.

Avoid Poisoning Risks

Secondary poisoning (poisoning that occurs when a predator eats a prey item that has ingested a poison such as anti-coagulant rodenticides is a major threat locally and nationwide top raptor populations. See "Raptors and Rodenticides" at : <https://test.seaandsageaudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Raptors-and-Anticoagulant-Rodenticides.pdf> As mentioned above installing barn owl nest boxes can be a good alternative, but only if installed in yards and neighborhoods that are rodenticide free.

Considerations for other Sensitive Species

In some areas there may be other sensitive species in your area, such as Stephen's kangaroo rats in Riverside. One would want to consider impacts to other species before adding a barn owl box to some properties. Local biologists and/or land managers should be consulted before installing barn owl boxes near sensitive species that might become prey items for a new family of owls in the neighborhood.

