

THE OWL & THE RODENT

The two primary types of owls seen here in the valley are the Common barn owl and the Great Horned owl.

The Barn owl, with its light colored heart-shaped face, feeds primarily on mice, rats and gophers. Gophers alone, make up 65% of its diet. This owl has been sited across North America and most interestingly, in Court House park in downtown Madera. Despite the fact that it can live in a variety of habitats, its population is declining. The Barn Owl, according to the Encyclopedia of North American Birds, is rare.

John and Mary Gallo, neighboring farmers who live in an adjoining piece of land, have a chronic gopher problem in their 20 acre vineyard. Much to the delight of John and Mary, Barn owls, sensing an abundance of food, moved in.

One day John spotted a dead Barn owl lying on the road near Highway 145 and Avenue 11-1/2. It had been shot.

Despite the shock, my resolve is to inform and educate the public about the value of owls in our farming community. I maintain that it is everyone's responsibility to advise, especially in light of an event that demonstrates impulsive irresponsibility.

How do owls contribute to the ecological balance of our environment? Owls eat one and a half times their weight each day. The fact that owls eat up to eight rodents a day and owlets require one to five rodents, depending on their age per day, it is easy to see how the owl benefits us in controlling pests. A newspaper article from a Yuba City publication suggests that owls scare crows. If so, this timely information considering clamoring that is going on about crows, in our town.

It is worth mentioning here, that the Fresno Bee printed an article on Dec. 26th by Erin Kennedy, about a gopher problem in the yard of a Clovis school ground. Greenskeeper, Doug Buchanan, at war with gophers. Since a recent Ca. law prohibits schools from using poisons that could harm kids, he decided to turn to a natural ally, the owl. (See Screeching to a Halt: Clovis Unified hopes nesting boxes will attract owls to eat gophers.) Kids in the school have designed owl boxes used on the school grounds.

The Barn owl's habits are fascinating. It hunts over farmland and suburbs at night and roosts in dark corners of farm and city buildings, in owl boxes, or trees. It does not build a nest, but lays 5-11 eggs on the bare surface in barns or attics. Owl boxes can be placed at least 20 feet (more or less) off the ground to entice them to nest. The eggs are incubated by the females alone for about 5 weeks.

Barn owl nesting boxes can be seen on two by fours attached to telephone poles on Road 20, between Avenue 12 and 13. The circular entrance to the owl boxes is surprisingly small. Feathers apparently make the birds appear larger than their actual size.

Incidentally, specific information about owl boxes can be attained through the University of CA Cooperative Extension office in Madera.

Great Horned owl, is quite large in size! The female is larger than the male, growing up to 22 inches at maturity, and is several inches larger than the Barn owl at maturity. It has distinctive bold yellow eyes, wide-spaced ear tufts, gray-brown in color with a white throat. It lays 2-4 eggs in abandoned hawk, heron or crow nests. It is an aggressive and skilled predator, hunting primarily at night, though it sometimes feeds during the daylight. It has a large and varied appetite eating rabbits, skunks, geese, lizards and much to the gardener and farmers delight, it eats squirrels and gophers. Look for the birds at dusk during feeding times. Its screech or warning is enough to intimidate the most fervent nature lovers.

One summer, a Great Horned owl was spotted in my family's pomegranate tree, and though I have heard owls on recent early morning walks down the driveway to get the newspaper, I am still waiting to be greeted by one.

How many times might that happen in a lifetime?

Ramona Frances of Madera is a University of California Master Gardener. She can be contacted by e-mail at garden@psnw.com. This column is provided by the University Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program in Madera County. The Master Gardener program extends research based information in home horticulture and pest management, verified by University of California experts to the citizens of our state. Call you U.C. Cooperative Extension Office in Madera with your gardening questions at 559-675-7879 Ext.204 to leave a message or stop by the office on Mondays from 1:00 - 3:00 p.m. to speak to a Master Gardener in person. See www.cemaderaucdavis.com.