

635-4970 (74-350) Owl Nesting Box

Introduction:

What exactly are owls?

Everyone knows that owls are birds, but not everyone knows how unique they are. Owls are *raptors*: a group of predatory birds that includes hawks and eagles. However, they have evolved certain unique characteristics to help them hunt. Nearly all owls are nocturnal, meaning they are active at night. Almost all other birds of prey, including vultures, are *diurnal*, meaning they are active during the day. Common features among raptors are: excellent vision, powerful beaks, and sharp talons.

In order to hunt effectively in darkness, owls need superior senses. Their huge eyes are fixed in their sockets, meaning the whole head must be turned to change the owl's view. This is partly due to the size of the eyes, but mostly due to the fact that the eyes are tubular, rather than spherical. While this seems cumbersome, it allows for very large eyes, which help provide excellent night vision. Most owls can rotate their heads over 270° to accommodate this lack of motion. Owls also have highly developed visual centers in their brains, which can make meaningful images out of scattered bits of data. With binocular vision thrown into the mix, owls have some of the most powerful night vision of any creature.

In addition, owls have incredible hearing. It is said an owl can hear the noise a worm makes as it burrows. This means that an owl can hunt effectively in total darkness or if it is blind. Asymmetrically positioned ears make it easier to pinpoint the exact location of prey. Unlike bats, owls do not have a system of echolocation.

Owls have also evolved to blend in with the night. Their feathers are often drab, which helps camouflage them. They also have a layer of very fine feathers on the leading edges of their wings. This breaks up turbulence. While it reduces overall lift, it allows the owl to fly almost silently. Curiously, an owl can hear itself fly, but very few mammals can. Due to these adaptations an owl can strike before the prey even knows it is there. Sharp talons and a powerful beak ensure a quick kill.

For the purposes of this kit we will discuss barn owls.

Barn owls are so named because they are often found in barns. Unlike most birds, they do not make nests. Instead, they search for cavities and lay their eggs directly inside. Anywhere cool and dark can make a suitable rearing place. They have been found in the hollows of trees, in caves, and even in old oil drums. Barns are a good place for them because they combine hiding places with a supply of rodents to eat. Many farmers do not mind having the owls in their barns; they are very useful for rodent control. Barn owls are found throughout most of the world, except Greenland, Antarctica, the far north, central Asia, and some remote deserts. They are one of the most widely distributed birds and in little danger of extinction.

Barn owls are relatively small for a bird of prey: the largest among them might weigh a pound and a half and have a wingspan of three feet. Females are usually larger, as is common with raptors. They are pale colored, which helps them blend in with moonlit surroundings. They are easily distinguished from other birds by their heart shaped faces. On some occasions, it is reported that barn owls can have bioluminescent fungus growing in their feathers. This, combined with silent flight and an otherworldly screech, may form the basis of some ghost sightings.

Unusually for a large carnivore, barn owls do not live very long, usually only 1-2 years. Some individuals in captivity have lived over 20 years, suggesting lifespan is limited by predation and injury rather than some innate mechanism. They also produce a large number of chicks, as many as 27, although most clutches are in the 7 to 12 range. Even so, that is a lot of baby birds. They grow rapidly

and require a large amount of food to sustain them. The parent owls must be successful hunters in order to provide for the young. They are highly adapted for feeding on small rodents, and these are their primary food source. A family of barn owls can consume over 3,000 rodents in a single breeding season! Barn owls also eat smaller birds, reptiles, and even invertebrates if they are desperate. They seldom attack pets or domestic animals. Often, these animals are simply too big for them. As a smaller bird, the barn owl prefers to strike quickly with precision, rather than brute force. Barn owls themselves fall prey to larger birds, such as hawks or the Great Horned Owl. Barn owls will live near open country where rodents can be easily found, and avoid dense woodlands, where their predators live.

Operation:

Setting up your owl nesting box requires proper placement. If the box is situated correctly, the owls will take care of the rest. Most owls are cavity nesters; they do not make nests, but look for nooks and crannies to hide their eggs. They are not picky, but they do look for dark, dry places. Your owl box is both of these.

The best place to put your owl box is to nail it to a tree or the side of a building by putting nails through the mounting tab on top of the box. You will need to put the box so that it faces a large open area. Owls do not usually live in woods because it is harder for them to hunt. Placing the box so that it faces a field, meadow, or parking lot will ensure that the owl can see the box as it is flying by, making it more likely it will decide to nest there. Open areas are also ideal places for the owls to catch prey, as there is nowhere for it to hide.

If possible, it is a good idea to mount the box in the shade. This prevents the inside temperature from becoming too uncomfortable. It should be kept out of windy areas, and if possible situated away from loud noises. Owls prefer peace and quiet.

When the owlets are produced, it is important not to bother them. They are helpless and easily frightened. Viewing of the owlets should be kept to a strict minimum, and it is better to simply leave them alone. If the owlets are very stressed, they will not develop properly.

The owls do not live in the box, but roost nearby. They will use the box solely to house their young and keep them out of the elements. The adult owls will need plenty of food to nourish the developing chicks. This means they will need a good supply of rodents. Rodents are plentiful in farm fields, areas where meadows border woods, and rubbish bins.

Warranty and Parts:

We replace all defective or missing parts free of charge. Additional replacement parts may be ordered toll-free. We accept MasterCard, Visa, checks and School P.O.s. All products warranted to be free from defect for 90 days. Does not apply to accident, misuse or normal wear and tear. Intended for children 13 years of age and up. This item is not a toy. It may contain small parts that can be choking hazards. Adult supervision is required.