

Conservation Corner

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I'll pick up where we left off last week midway through a session on how to reach teens at the Fall IAN Workshop in Floyd County. Dallas County Naturalist Mike Havlik shared a program aimed at middle school students during which they built, mounted, and monitored 40 kestrel boxes. Next year they plan to build, mount, and monitor 30 barn owl boxes. Wait, barn owl boxes? I was familiar with bluebird, kestrel, and wood duck boxes, but not boxes for barn owls. It's time for a closer look at this valuable and now endangered piece of Iowa's natural heritage.



At the time of settlement, barn owls were common in Iowa, hunting voles and mice in prairies or along wetland edges and nesting in silver maple, sycamore, and white oak trees. Barn owls were able to adapt to their new neighbors and adjusted to hunting in pasture or hay ground and nesting in old barns or abandoned buildings. In the past fifty years, though, barn owls have struggled mightily to recover from the DDT fiasco of the 1960s in a landscape now dominated by row crops and metal machine sheds and grain bins.

Tyto alba or the common barn owl, also known as the "ghost" or "spirit" owl, are easily recognized by their white, heart-shaped faces and slender bodies covered with velvety feathers. They can see in almost total darkness, hear the heart beat of a mouse, and fly soundlessly through the night.

Barn owls swallow their prey as nearly whole as possible and then, 12 hours after mealtime, regurgitate a pellet of undigested fur, feathers, and bones. Barn owls produce two pellets a day that average 2 inches in length. Did you know they use pellets to line their nesting cavities? For scientists, pellets yield valuable information about the role of both predator and prey in the food chain.

The study of one barn owl revealed the following diet over the course of one year: 1,407 mice, 143 rats, 7 bats, 5 young rabbits, 375 house sparrows, 23 starlings, 54 other birds, 4 lizards, 174 frogs, 25 moths, and 52 crickets. Uff-da!

Several groups are working together to restore barn owl populations here in Iowa. CRP acres provide hunting habitat while the Iowa DNR is currently focusing on nesting habitat. Barn owl boxes, a vital part of barn owl conservation, are making a difference. Plans may be downloaded from the IDNR website or picked up at our office.

Since 2012, the S.O.A.R. facility near Carroll has admitted 20 barn owl adults, hatchlings, and eggs, many rescued from grain bins. To help scientists track Iowa's few remaining barn owls, please report any sightings or nestings to the IDNR Wildlife Diversity Program at 515-432-2823.

I'll close with a barn owl sighting from 20 years ago. When Kyle moved onto his acreage near Sunken Grove in 1995, there was a barn owl living in the barn, but he has not seen one since. Have you ever seen a barn owl in Pocahontas County?