

Owls Hinder Civic Center Restoration

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SAN RAFAEL (KRON) -- Workers who are restoring Marin County's Civic Center spire are climbing carefully around a family of squatters. They have taken up residence in the 240-foot high tower.

The towering spire must have looked like a fancy tree, or maybe a Marin County condo to a pair of barn owls.

Now it's home to their five fattening nestlings. High, dry, dark and private, or at least it was until restoration workers came along.

Wildcare naturalist Alex Godbe says, "When construction came to clean this area, I believe there was a panel that was taken down, one bird flew out, and flew straight past the person looking."

Inside, huddled in a corner, the baby barn owls stared back at a startled worker. Suddenly, the retrofit management company had new problems: How much time would be lost? What's this going to cost?

Working with Wildcare of San Rafael, the construction company altered its schedule. Instead of cleaning the tower's inside first, they started with the outside.

But when they leave, they'll be leaving a bit of a mess behind.

"There are pellets, actually, which are the regurgitated bones and fur that the owl didn't digest. And probably, in a year, these guys, a family like this, can consume 20,000 rodents," Alex says.

Barn owls have a history of nesting in steeples and attics. It may be that they like nests with lots of room, and can't find old trees that offer as much.

That's one reason Wildcare's "**Hungry Owl**" project sets out owl boxes for nests. It may keep them out of barns and civic centers, and out of trouble.

If the nestlings aren't ready to take wing by the time the cleaning gets to them, the cleaning will just have to wait. Wildcare says that loss of nesting trees and the poisoning of the mice that owls eat are contributing to the decline in the barn owl population.

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