



## The Hungry Owl Project Newsletter

### Dear Friends of Owls,

2003 was a great year with more than 150 owl boxes, 2 bat boxes, and 2 American Kestrel boxes going up in and around Marin. We began our research study with the help of Buzz Hull, Research Director of Golden Gate Raptor Observatory (GGRO) and Anne Ardillo, long-time GGRO volunteer, expert bander, and HOP volunteer. We banded and took measurements and weights of dozens of baby barn owls found in our boxes, noting types of trees and surrounding habitat. The plan this year is to expand the research and invite schools and colleges to participate in ongoing research projects. Already we have put up boxes at several schools in Marin, which will be part of presentations and studies for the students throughout the year. We are re-

searching the following questions:

- How successful are the Hungry Owl boxes and do the owls prefer any certain design?
- How long do Barn owls live in Marin (the average age is 18 months in the wild)?
- What are they eating here in Marin and do they have a prey preference?
- Many Barn Owls are now nesting very near to human activity. How do they adapt to urban settings?
- How far do the juveniles disperse and do they return to their place of hatching.
- What causes their death?
- How many die of rodenticide poisoning or other toxins?

### 2003 Accomplishments

Our most exciting event in 2003 was WildCare's acquisition of a non-releasable Barn Owl, whom HOP Director Alex Godbe is training for public presentation. We've given her the name Tecolote—Teco for short—which means owl in Spanish. Teco has an irreparable foot injury, preventing her from hunting successfully in the wild. She's passed a round of temperament tests to make sure she can adjust to a life with people, and we hope she will adapt to being a "wildlife ambassador" for WildCare and the Hungry Owl Project.

HOP received its first ever grant! We are truly grateful to the donors, who wish to remain anonymous. This grant will be used to improve our research and education efforts.



Tecolote, wildlife ambassador

We provided boxes to many groups around Marin, including Marin County Open Space District, McInnis Park, City of Novato, Marin County Parks, and Meadow Club Golf Course. Thanks to these organizations, Barn Owls have many more safe places to live in Marin's open spaces.

We've begun work on our web site: [www.hungryowl.org](http://www.hungryowl.org), which features news and updates, photos, stories, and more. AND, we've set up web cams in one of our occupied owl boxes. The box has a pair of breeding Barn Owls. You'll soon be able to see live footage of this couple as they hatch their eggs and care for their young.

Visit our web site often and let us know what you think!

#### Inside this issue:

Making Our Voice Heard	2
Are Your Boxes Occupied?	2
Returning Babies to the Nest	2
Education	3
Foster Care Program	3
A Note from the HOP Team	4

#### How You Can Help The Hungry Owl Project

If you've seen an active raptor nest, please call HOP with the location and landmarks.

We may be able to use the nest for orphans we've found, if they're the appropriate age.

We are also trying to collect data on raptors' nests in Marin.

## Making Our Voice Heard

HOP gave many presentations and participated in several environmental events, including the Wildlife Conservation Network Conference at Mills College where we saw one of our inspirations: Jane Goodall (*see a very special quote on page 4*).



Our table at the WCN event

Other events we participated in include the Green Festival in San Geronimo, the Marin Art & Garden Center, and Farm Days at the Civic Center. We spread the word about the dangers of rodenticides to all birds of prey, other predators and household pets.

We received wonderful media attention in the past year. Alex Godbe was interviewed and featured in the Urban Animal column on [sfgate.com](http://sfgate.com) – you can find a link to the interview on our web site: [www.hungryowl.org](http://www.hungryowl.org). HOP volunteer Maggie Rufo was interviewed live on KGO radio about the project. An article was published in the Marin IJ on our foster program – two young owls were fostered out to one of our boxes on the property of Pacheco Winery in Novato.

MCSTOPPP (Marin County Stormwater Pollution Prevention Program) featured us in one of their newsletters, and also featured us in their 2004 calendar, which is available for free at WildCare and other locations around Marin. In coming months we will be featured in the GGRO newsletter as well as the Marin Humane Society newsletter.

## Are Your Boxes Occupied?

Breeding season generally starts in January with the male looking for a suitable nest site. Once he has found a site and moved in, he tries to attract a mate. Courtship behavior begins 6-8 weeks before laying the first eggs. The time of year varies depending often on weather and availability of prey. Activity is centered in and around the nest site. Some existing pairs

may have roosted together at the nest site over the winter, but most roost apart—males, in particular, roost away from the nest. Males start spending more and more time at the chosen nest site at the

beginning of the breeding season enticing their partners into the box. Once the female has accepted and is ensconced inside the box she becomes more and more “broody” and she stays in the box for extended periods of time. Before mating, the male presents her with food. 5-7 eggs are laid at 2-3 day intervals. Eggs hatch after about a month—one at a time, every 2 to 3 days (asynchronous hatching), so the owlets can differ in age by as much as 2 weeks.



The first signs of an occupied box might be frequent calls around the box at night or scratch marks around the box entrance. Since the owls eject their pellets into the box, as

well as sometimes defecating in the box, you may or may not see “white wash” on the ground near the box. The drainage holes in the bottom of the box may appear blocked if in use because the pellets form a soft substrate in the bottom of the box. It is very important NOT to disturb the box at this time as the females are most likely to abandon the nest even if already incubating eggs. If your box is on a pole, avoid touching the pole as any vibration could cause the female to take flight. Here in Marin, eggs are laid usually around March, and hatch in April, but there seems to be a lot of variation. In some years, two clutches may be laid—one in Spring and another in Summer.

If you believe you have a pair of owls nesting in your box, please call HOP at 415-454-4587. We will be banding babies again this Summer for our research.

If you find a baby owl on the ground, please call your local wildlife rehabilitation center and follow the instructions on page 3.

### Don't Peek!

Giving a home to a family of owls is a very special experience.

But always remember: these are wild animals who must have peace and quiet. Don't check up on them or show them to friends. Please leave them alone.

## Returning Baby Hawks and Owls to the Nest

Each year HOP and GGRO volunteers, along with volunteer tree climbers, team up to return fallen baby hawks and owls to their nests or a foster nest. Often high winds can cause a nest to fall out of the tree. When this happens any baby raptors



Alex Godbe checking on baby Barn Owls

found on the ground are taken to WildCare for medical evaluation. If found to be healthy, the babies must be returned to the nest—or a newly constructed nest at the original nest site—within 48 hours. During this time-frame the parents will still accept the young as their own.

If the nest is still in the tree, the babies are simply returned to the nest. If the nest has been destroyed, a new nest can be fashioned using large wicker baskets that are wired onto a tree branch as close as possible to the original nest site. Babies are placed in the new nest and then monitored for several days to make sure the parents have responded to their cries for food and care. Using

this method we have successfully returned 28 baby raptors so far.

### If you find a baby raptor on the ground

Please call your local wildlife rehabilitation center or WildCare: Terwilliger Nature Education & Wildlife Rehabilitation at 415-453-1000 and the HOP Hotline at 415-518-9670. Locate the nest or owl box, *take note of the street address and any landmarks where the baby was found*. See if the parents are present in the area (they may be aggressive) and look for any other babies that may have fallen from the nest or box—most raptor nests contain more than one chick. If the baby is injured or in danger from predators, pick it up (wear leather or heavy gloves to protect yourself) and place it in a covered box or pet carrier, then place it in a dark, quiet place away from pets and children until help arrives. Handle it as little as possible. Do not attempt to feed it or offer it water. If the bird is not injured it can be placed back in the nest or we will create a new nest for it—if placed back in the nest in a reasonable amount of time, the parents will find it by its cries and continue caring for it. If the youngster is injured it will be taken to the rehabilitation center for medical treatment until ready for release.

*Even baby owls and raptors have sharp talons. Wear leather gloves when handling them, and call WildCare, HOP or the Marin Humane Society for help if you are at all uncomfortable.*

## Education

In addition to all of our other activities, we visit schools and other groups to teach natural history, and the need to protect and respect all living creatures. We also talk about pest management using Barn Owls rather than poisons as a means of rodent control. With live birds, we have visited several schools, giving more than 700 children a unique opportunity to meet our wild friends. We have put together a brief slide show, which we hope to expand on in the future; we also have a 15 minute video, created by HOP volunteer Trinka Marris, which condenses footage from one of our owl boxes. It shows an entire breeding cycle from courting to egg laying to fledging. If your school or group would like a presentation, please contact HOP. Presentations are free, but donations to HOP are appreciated, as well as efforts by groups to construct boxes for our project.

## Foster Care Program

If you have a box on your property that is unoccupied, you may be able to act as a foster parent to orphaned Barn Owls. The young owls can be placed in your box and must be fed by the foster parent(s). Please call HOP Director Alex Godbe for details (415-454-4587). You must be willing to place food in the box daily—this usually means climbing a ladder to reach the box and keeping frozen mice (provided by WildCare) in your freezer for several weeks. Documentation of feedings and progress will be required of the foster parent(s), as well as allowing regular visits by the Hungry Owl Project. Last year we successfully fostered and released two young barn owls with the help of the Rowland family at the Pacheco Vineyard in Novato.



How's this for a set of talons?



## The Hungry Owl Project A Project of WildCare

74 Creek Road  
Fairfax, CA 94930

Hotline: 415-518-9670  
Phone: 415-454-4784

Visit Our LIVE Owl Cam  
[www.hungryowl.org](http://www.hungryowl.org)

## A Note From the HOP Team

We hope you have enjoyed this first edition of our newsletter and we dedicate this edition to the memory of one of our original friends and volunteers: Pat Davis. Our goal is to communicate with you at least twice each year to update you on our progress. In addition, the Hungry Owl Project is in need of volunteers – whether you'd like to build owl boxes, help us improve our educational presentations, do research or fund-raising – we'd love to hear from you! Remember – if you have owl boxes up you must not use any form of rodenticide. If you are having unmanageable rodent problems, please contact us before putting out any poisons. We can refer you to environmentally friendly pest management companies. Please review the *Raptors and Rodenticides* flyer on our web site for more information – you can also download and print out the flyer to share with others.

Finally, we would like to thank the following individuals and groups for ongoing help with our project: Karen Wilson & the staff of WildCare; Camille Gazeau and Hibou the Great Horned Owl; Mary Blake; GGRO; Melanie Donaghy; Janet Barth of Habitat for Hooters; Debbie and

Herb Rowland; Phil Johnson; and Peggy and Pat Davis. Thanks to San Rafael High School, Hall Middle School, and Mill Valley Eagle Scouts for building owl boxes.

*"Owls are vanishing from so many parts of their historic range. As one example, the Barn Owls whose haunting voices thrilled my childhood nights are gone. That is why the Hungry Owl Project is a much-needed and very important initiative. I hope that every bird lover—every nature lover—will support it. Let us ensure that these marvelous birds, with their huge eyes and silent flight, will be around to bring magic to the night after we are gone. Their future lies in our hands."*  
— Jane Goodall

**Best wishes for a happy Spring and Summer!**  
Alex Godbe, Trinkia Marris, Dexter Johnson, Darren Davis,  
Anne Ardillo, Maggie Rufo