

The Hungry Owl Project

Newsletter

179 The Alameda, San Anselmo, CA 94960 415.454.4587 www.hungryowl.org

Fall 2009

Vineyard Management Program Expands at Kendall-Jackson Vineyards



Sparkling green rows of vines stretch to infinity on a warm, late spring day in a Sonoma county vineyard. With an infrared pole camera in hand we creep quietly toward one of the several owl boxes installed on the perimeter of the vineyard. Peering inside with the camera we see, on the handheld monitor from below, five white faces bobbing and swaying madly. A loud

hissing erupts from inside the box, sounding like my espresso machine steaming milk for my morning coffee.

"Congratulations," I tell the vineyard owner. "You are a proud father of five healthy baby barn owls."

In a short while these furious youngsters will join the rest of the flying rodent patrol, hunting gophers and other rodents in the depth of night. Gophers and voles cause much damage to the vines and managing rodent populations is a constant and costly problem for vineyard owners.

This year the Hungry Owl Project has expanded its Vineyard Management Program (VMP), reaching out to vineyards in Napa and Sonoma County, as well as Marin. The goal of the VMP is to increase, maintain, and insure a healthy barn owl population in the vineyards. Although one barn owl can consume over 50 pounds of gophers each year, trapping is still necessary until the vines are mature. Once the vines are over five years old, the damage from gophers is less of a problem. Trapping, along with the owls, is the best long term solution.

This non-toxic integrated pest management (IPM) approach is being adopted by most vineyards now. Using barn owls has become popular to assist in rodent control, so now less poison is being used.

Monitoring the owl nesting boxes annually is important to determine the success of the breeding owls and make recommendations. At this time we also check the boxes for repairs. With the safety and well being of the owls in mind, the boxes need to be watertight, facing the correct way, stable, and in correct locations with shade. One problem that can occur with the installation of boxes, on posts for example, is that this year we found that previously recommended 4x4 posts tend to snap. This can be caused by high winds, a top heavy box that has not been cleaned each year, or where the box is just too high and is putting too much pressure on the post. We now recommend using 4x6 redwood posts at a height of about 9' -10' from the bottom of the box to the ground. Metal posts can work well if the boxes are securely attached.



Barn owl boxes are an important component of a vineyard's integrated pest management plan.

Our recommendations also include placement of perching for the owl's best hunting opportunities within the vines. Owls hunt both by flying low over the ground and from a perch. Installing perches can encourage the owls to hunt in areas of high rodent infestation. An annual report is given to vineyard owners who subscribe to the program with number of owls recorded, recommendations for repairs needed, more boxes (if needed), boxes that might need replacing or moving to a new location, as well as a list of boxes that will need cleaning in October or November. Most importantly we give recommendations for the best placement of the boxes, which can be the key for success. Each box is numbered

and a GPS is taken entered into a database. We hope to use this information as a basis for future studies.

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Meeting with vineyard managers has been very helpful to discuss problems or ideas that help to further and improve the program. We have learned improved ways of installing the boxes from their efforts. We have learned of the problems with gopher control. One topic we have been discussing is the most humane and efficient gopher traps. Thomas Wittman from www.gopherslimited.com has recommended using cinch traps because they need less work to set, are very successful, and are more humane because they kill the gophers most efficiently. Most other types of traps are only 50% likely to completely kill, leaving injured gophers to suffer. HOP will always first recommend prevention and exclusion, along with encouraging beneficial predators, and trapping only if necessary. Where trapping is necessary, we have set up a gopher

collection from some vineyards. Dead gophers are collected daily from the traps, bagged and put into freezer. We collect them and use them to feed orphaned and injured owls. Giving orphaned owls natural prey helps them not only thrive, but also helps them to recognize prey. When possible rehabilitated owls are released into vineyards, giving them a safe release site while helping the vineyard owner increase the flying rodent patrol.



HOP volunteer Linda Knight releases a healthy juvenile barn owl into a nesting box after it had recovered from an injury and a stay in rehabilitation.



Working with local vineyards, Kendall-Jackson and Mendocino Wine Company, we have been happy to see that a greener approach in the vineyards is becoming more and more established. There is great enthusiasm for barn owls. These little birds with the big appetites are amazing little hunters, and our best ally when it comes to rodent control. At little cost to maintain and easy to attract, their presence in a vineyard gives a sense of balance and harmony. It makes us feel good knowing that each night the plants are protected as the flying rodent patrol wings out over the vines under the night sky.

HOP needs your support!
Donate online at
www.hungryowl.org

Photographs top to bottom. While monitoring this spring, we found this box on a 4x4 post that has almost snapped and was leaning dangerously. Three baby owlets were rescued, the post temporarily secured, and the young owls safely replaced back in the box. 1. Box dangerously leaning. 2. HOP Director Alex Godbe rescuing owlet. 3. Rescued owlet at 3-4 weeks old will be dependent on its parents for 7 weeks or more.

The Hungry Owl Project has been busy fulfilling our mission this year. In addition to the expansion of the Vineyard Management Program (Article, Pages 1-2), the impact of our work in habitat conservation, education, research, and foster care, as well as our partnerships with the community, continued to grow this year as well.

Habitat Conservation

Through box sales, installations and distribution of box plans, HOP was involved in hundreds of new boxes being placed in locations all over the United States and beyond this year. More boxes means more habitat for barn owls, screech owls, kestrels, bluebirds and a variety of bats, as proper nesting places can be provided in places where natural nesting sites may have been eliminated by development.

Education

We received dozens of requests for box plans this year from people all over the United States. Box plans are distributed by email but hard copies continue to be available through the mail to those who request them. This year we updated our bat, screech owl and bluebird plans with improved designs for the birds and clarifications for the builders. HOP gave several presentations featuring Wookie, the Ambassador barn owl, for children this year, including Edna Maguire School, Marin Academy, Marin Art & Garden Center Summer Camp, St. Vincent's School for Boys, and others. Many presentations were also given for adults at Sloat Garden Centers, the Carolyn Parr Nature Center, the WildCare Gala, and for Comcast News Makers.

Research

2009 brought several weekends of nest box monitoring and banding of young birds by HOP Director Alex Godbe, Anne Ardillo, Linda Knight and others. In 2010, we look forward to working with student researchers to monitor both residential boxes and boxes installed in agricultural settings as part of the Vineyard Management Program.

Foster Care

HOP helped WildCare foster and release over 20 orphaned barn owls and western screech owls this year. HOP Volunteer Rob Jaret, of Novato, hacked out (fostered) two young barn owls during the 2009 season. This was Rob's second year as a barn owl foster dad and he did a great job. Rob has installed a small camera set up in his barn owl box so that he can observe the owls on a monitor inside his house. After the birds fledged, Rob was rewarded with return visits and sightings of his foster owls.



Left to right. Two young western screech owls fostered in HOP Director Alex Godbe's aviary, and a pair of young barn owls fostered by Rob Jaret.



Left to right. Children dissect owl pellets on a HOP field trip to Marin Art & Garden Center. Young owls in a box at Marin Art & Garden Center are the stars of streaming owl cam images to HOP's website.

Owl Cams

HOP streamed images from two owl boxes to our web site this year, one from San Domenico School featuring a wild owl family, and another from Marin Art & Garden Center featured hacked out juvenile barn owls that had been displaced from their natural nests. Many viewers visited the site and were quick to email us if anything at all looked worrisome with the owls. Viewers also captured many wonderful photos from the cam and sent them to HOP. We hope to raise money, via donations, to improve our camera and streaming so that we could provide viewers with a live video stream in the future. To make a donation, please visit our web site where we can now accept donations via credit card!

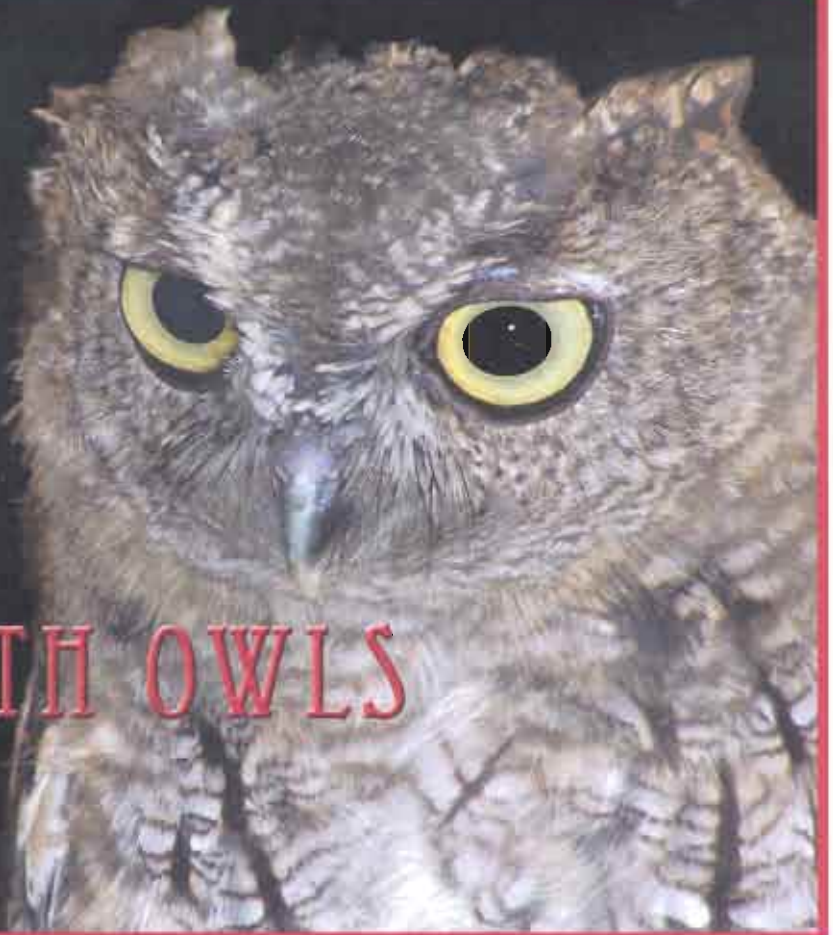
Partnering with the Community

The vast majority of the boxes distributed by HOP are made in partnership with Eagle Scouts, high school and middle school woodshops and other volunteers from the community. Other volunteers help HOP put on educational events, and with publicity, box design, monitoring, and cleaning, event planning, and many other important functions. We want to thank all of the wonderful volunteers who have supported HOP with many hours of their precious time this year. We could not do it without you.



Left to right. Eagle Scouts Seth Everett and Michael Holman show off the barn owl and bluebird boxes they made for their Eagle Scout projects.

Please join the Hungry Owl Project for Evening with Owls, an entertaining and educational event held in the presence of owls. This year we will celebrate Marin County's beautiful native owls with a talk by College of Marin's Joe Mueller. The event will also feature presentations by the Hungry Owl Project, artwork by local artists, a light buffet dinner, wine and a live auction.



EVENING WITH OWLS

Presented by the
Hungry Owl Project

Marin Art & Garden Center
November 20, 2009, 6:00 p.m.

Hungry Owl Project
179 The Alameda, San Anselmo, CA 94960

HOP is a program of WildCare, 76 Albert Park Ln, San Rafael

Vineyard Management Program

Includes:

- Initial consult and site recommendations
- Box numbering and GPS location
- Pole cam monitoring 1-2 times annually
- Annual occupancy and maintenance report
- Annual box clearing

Annual Fee: \$50-75 per box
New Barn Owl Box installation \$345



Residential & Commercial Box Program

- Barn Owl Boxes \$90 with sunroof \$100
(gophers, rats, voles)
- Screech Owl Boxes \$45
(wood rats, mice, voles, insects)
- American Kestrel Boxes \$45
(mice, voles, insects)
- Bat Boxes (insects) \$65
- Bluebird boxes (insects) \$20
- Annual Box Cleaning \$40



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