



# The Hungry Owl Project

[www.hungryowl.org](http://www.hungryowl.org)

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## Baby Screech Owls

Spring is a busy time for arborists trimming and cutting trees, which makes it a busy time for WildCare, Baskets for Birds, and the Hungry Owl Project (HOP). We wish that every tree trimmer and homeowner, would carefully check trees before trimming or cutting, or wait until late Autumn/early Winter (some owls nest as early as January). Right now squirrels and birds are using all available sites to raise families. Baskets for Birds (*see Page 2*) works to return raptor babies to the nest, or to a substitute nest, whenever possible, and HOP sometimes fosters young, displaced barn owls in unoccupied nest boxes.

In 2003 these two projects worked together with two newly hatched Western Screech Owls displaced when tree trimmers cut away a branch containing their home. Brought to WildCare, the babies were dangerously cold and hungry. After warming and feeding them, Alex Godbe went to the site and installed a screech owl box near the original nest site, and put the babies inside, in hopes the parents would



hear their calls and return. In the morning Alex found a mouse had been left inside the box, but it had not been torn up to be fed to the babies. This indicated that the male owl had brought food in, but the female had not returned to feed it to her babies. Once again the babies

were dangerously cold, so they went back to WildCare.

The dilemma we faced was how to feed and raise these owls, while keeping them wild at heart? Young animals can “imprint” on humans that care for them - they look at humans as their own kind, and do not learn wild survival skills. It is so critical to ALWAYS contact a wildlife hospital, or humane society, if you find a baby animal. An animal that imprints on humans is doomed to either euthanasia or placement as an educational animal (living in a cage for the rest of its life). Our solution was “slow-

release.” In a remote location, we had previously built a slow-release cage for a Northern Spotted Owl. We would now outfit it for the two screech owls. In the cage, they would have minimal interaction from humans, but would be outdoors experiencing the natural world that we hoped to return them to. MMWD Ranger Phil Johnson



would feed the owls every evening, and HOP volunteers would bring more food and check on the owls.

Western Screech Owls are small, fierce predators. Measuring only 8.5” high and weighing about 5 oz., they resemble miniature Great Horned Owls with their tufts and attitude. Screech owls are cavity nesters, often using the holes of large woodpeckers as they cannot make their own hole, and rely on available natural cavities in order to breed. That’s another reason dead trees should be left standing whenever possible; they provide homes for many creatures. We are also aware of owls nesting in the recesses of roofs. They will use nest boxes and HOP makes and sells boxes suitable for screech owls (or American Kestrels). Both are important beneficial predators for keeping rodent populations in check.

The Hungry Owl Project has made it possible for us to closely observe owls nesting on our campus. These sightings magically transport the viewers from an egocentric place to one of community. We feel renewed closeness with each other as we stand together transfixed by nature. We also feel a renewed closeness to the natural world in which we live. Watching the owls simply unites us with a feeling of balance and belonging regardless of age or perspective. This is wonderful enough, and there are so many curriculum tie-ins too!  
-Karlyn Strand  
San Domenico School Library

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The Hungry Owl Project is a program of WildCare: Terwilliger Nature Education & Wildlife Rehabilitation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, tax ID #51-0172441, [wildcarebayarea.org](http://wildcarebayarea.org).

## Earth Day at Nicasio School

In celebration of the 35<sup>th</sup> annual Earth Day, the Hungry Owl Project spent the day at Nicasio School installing bluebird boxes. In 2003 some Nicasio School students helped construct eight Barn Owl boxes, two of which are installed at the school. Barn Owl families have used the two boxes at the school, and next year HOP hopes to install a camera in one of the boxes to allow the students to peek into the lives of Barn Owls.

Our Earth Day at Nicasio also included students from Hall Middle School in Larkspur. Ted Stoeckley's 2004/05 Woodshop class received an Earth Day Every Day grant from the Marin Community Foundation, which they used to buy materials to make Western Bluebird boxes. Western Bluebirds are in decline in many parts of the country, due to lack of nesting cavities because old trees continue to be cut down, and use of pesticides, such as Roundup, which poison the insects they consume. A long-term study (1966-1995) found a 23% decrease in California's bluebird population. In New York State, Tree Swallow nestlings were found dead after an application of Roundup in the area. Mr. Stoeckley's class came out to the Nicasio School to deliver the new Western Bluebird/ Tree Swallow homes they had created.



*Ranger Phil Johnson talks about bluebirds.*



*Alex Godbe with Vladimir*

The Hungry Owl Project and MMWD Ranger Phil Johnson did brief presentations on two of the birds commonly seen around the school: Turkey Vultures and Western Bluebirds. HOP's Maggie Rufo talked about Turkey Vultures while WildCare's educational Turkey Vulture, Vladimir, gave the students an up-close look. Ranger Johnson, no stranger to bluebirds and their natural history, talked to the students about the design of the boxes and the requirements for installation.

After lunch and the presentation, students and volunteers began creation of the Nicasio Bluebird Trail in a meadow next to the school. Each bluebird box is paired with a second box within 10 feet for Tree Swallows. Bluebirds are territorial and will not tolerate another bluebird pair within about 300 feet, but they do not spar with other species. Tree Swallows also nest in boxes, so by pairing these two species the hope is that each will get a safe nesting site. Future plans for the school include creation of a nature trail, in the meadow hosting the boxes, so students can get an up-close experience of the natural behavior of bluebirds and swallows, both of which are beneficial to humans due to their voracious appetites for insects.

Another creature with a beneficial and greedy appetite for pests, such as mosquitoes, is the bat. San Rafael High's woodshop class, led by Bob Holdt, has made bat boxes for us and HOP will donate one for the Nicasio nature trail.

Thanks to Ranger Phil Johnson, and the students of Hall Middle School and San Rafael High, as well as Nicasio residents John Wick and Peggy Rathman for their ongoing and much appreciated support, and everyone who helped in the creation of the bluebird trail at Nicasio School. The Hungry Owl Project has bluebird boxes, bat boxes, and owl boxes available for purchase. We are also looking for more schools and other groups to make boxes!

## Baskets for Birds

April showers may bring May flowers, but spring showers, when accompanied by wind, usually bring frantic calls to Baskets for Birds. For the past three years, late May and June have been the peak times for rescuing nestling raptors whose nests have blown out of trees, been displaced by human activity, or who have fallen out of nests.

Since 2001, Baskets for Birds has worked with WildCare and the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory (GGRO) to rescue more than 50 hawks, falcons and owls. In some instances we were fortunate to reunite them with their own parents by putting them back in the original nests, or using baskets or owl boxes in cases of destroyed nests and trees. Others were placed into foster nests that were then monitored by volunteers of GGRO's BARNs program. One group of Barn Owls was placed in an empty owl box at the Nicasio School. Cameras inside the box broadcast images of the owls to our web site, providing a unique educational opportunity.



predators, your rodent problem will get much worse. Please visit our web site, or call us, if you need help with non-toxic methods of rodent control.

If you find a nestling raptor on the ground, and feel it is in danger, please contact Anne Ardillo at 510-237-7221 or Alex Godbe at 415-518-9670, and bring it into the closest Wildlife Rehab facility. Provide as much information as possible about the exact location where the raptor was found to give us the best possible chance of returning it to its parents. Please visit our web site for a link to instructions on how to safely handle injured raptors.

We hope to save even more nestling hawks and owls this year. We need large, sturdy

baskets to serve as substitute nests, as well as cash donations to hire professional tree climbers who can reach these difficult nest sites. If you'd like to help, send your tax-deductible contribution to "WildCare" in care of "Baskets for Birds".



A wonderful outcome of our Baskets for Birds project is the people we have met. We have had tremendous support from public agencies, schools, neighborhoods and private homeowners. Many thanks to them and a special thank you to Jim Cairnes of Small World Tree

Service, our volunteer tree climber, for his ongoing help returning raptors to their nests.

We'd also like to remind you all of some simple things you can do to help. The most important thing you can do is refrain from tree trimming, pruning and cutting during most of the year. Restrict all tree activity to the fall season. Some hawks don't fully fledge until late August, early September, while Great Horned Owls begin nesting as early as January. If you have a tree that cannot wait due to the danger it might cause by falling, at the very least have a professional arborist carefully inspect the tree for nests, and call WildCare or the Hungry Owl Project if nests are found. Equally important is to never use pesticides, especially rat or gopher poisons on your property. These cause secondary poisoning of rodent predators: hawks, owls, cats, coyotes, and bobcats. Once you kill off the rodents and the predators, more rodents will arrive, but without enough natural

I want to encourage barn owls in my vineyards because they eat gophers. It does appear that we have been very successful in filling up several of the boxes that we put up. While it has not yet made a noticeable difference in my vineyard, I am confident that it will, based upon my observations at several other vineyards with owl boxes, notably the Stubbs'. The Hungry Owl Project has been extremely helpful with better box designs, better locations, help in putting up the boxes, spreading the word, monitoring the boxes, and cleaning them.

Thank you very much! Mark Pasternak  
Devils Gulch Ranch, Box 557, Nicasio, Ca 94946

**Thank You! Thank You! Thank You!**

*Special thanks to the following for their help and support of the Hungry Owl Project: Mary Blake; Jim Cairnes, Small World Tree Service; Darren Davis; Don Freundt, photographer; Camille Gazeau & Hibou; Bob Holdt, Woodshop Class San Rafael High School; Phil Johnson; Margareta Luff; Debbie & Herb Rowland, Pacheco Ranch; Ted Stoeckley's woodshop class at Hall Middle School; Karlyn Strand, San Domenico School; Rosalie Webb & Ralph Major, John Wick & Peggy Rathman; and WildCare.*

**Hungry Owl Project Team:** Alex Godbe, Director, Trinkia Marris, Maggie Rufo, Anne Ardillo.



## The Hungry Owl Project

### A Project of WildCare

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## Baby Screech Owls

*(Continued from page 1)*

The *Marin Breeding Bird Atlas* (1993) reports nesting screech owls found “primarily in the eastern and north-central oak-dominated portions of the County.” They were “lacking from the grassland-dominated areas on outer Point Reyes and around Tomales and from most of the moist dense coastal forests, particularly where there was a thick understory.”

Contrary to their name, Western Screech Owls do not screech. Instead, they make a soft hooting or whistling sound that trails off at the end. (To hear owl sounds visit [owlpages.com](http://owlpages.com).) Screech owls are strictly nocturnal and during the day, if not nesting in a cavity, they roost close up against the trunks of trees where they become virtually invisible. Their mottled brown and black coloration makes them look like the proverbial bump on a log. Screech owls eat a variety of foods including small rodents, lizards, crayfish, small birds, and many kinds of insects. They, in turn, are preyed on by larger owls,

*Barn owls, which have exceptionally good hearing, are excellent at learning from experience. As youngsters they learn to locate their prey at night by homing in on sounds, using their two ears to focus as if they were 3-D cameras -- making what Eric Knudsen, a Stanford neurobiologist, calls an "auditory space map." Even if one ear is plugged, Knudsen's experiments have shown, a barn owl will learn to zero in on its prey after only a few weeks of trial and error on its own.*

—Excerpted from a 2/7/05 article in the *SF Chronicle*, by David Perlman

such as the Great Horned Owl (GHO).

Once the babies were placed in their slow-release aviary we monitored them via a video camera. Each time we went out with food, we removed a tape from our VCR and viewed their behavior in the cage. As darkness fell, the little owls would become active and engage in chasing after moths in the cage. They also began to hunt live mice that we provided for them. Seeing a raptor live hunt its prey is a critical requirement before safe release. An amazing sight was that of a Great Horned Owl's futile attempts to get into the cage in order to prey on our owls! Needless to say, the screech owls were very upset while the GHO was pouncing on their nice, safe cage. Eventually it was time for our young owls to go out into the world.

When we created an opening for their exit, the owls were quite reluctant to leave the safety of the cage, and who can blame them? In captivity they had everything they needed: food, shelter, safety from predators. But the one thing they lacked was freedom. Eventually our pair chose freedom, and we hope they continue to fly free in the wild where they belong.

