

## The Barn Owl and Rehabilitation Programs

I am writing this piece in order to enlighten raptor rehabilitators and others who have plans to release juvenile barn owl after captive care, of the results that will likely take place. Upon reading this piece I hope those involved will understand my concerns are based on experience, and in no way reflect any negative thoughts toward wildlife rehabilitators.

It is my experience that raptor rehabilitators have a primary goal to care for and reestablish health in the birds they offer care for. The general idea is to offer Veterinary care and exercise to wild raptors and orphaned juveniles with the end result being release back into the wild, and this idea is based on the assumption that the rehabilitated bird will once again be free to breed and produce young. Although such a concept has justification for many raptorial birds, it is very unlikely to be successful with barn owl.

From experience gained during the 1980s and early 1990s at several research sites throughout the country (U.S.), and personally in Iowa and Central California, I've learned that captive released barn owl, either adult or juvenile, usually die within a few days after such release. In Iowa, Missouri and Wisconsin we collectively released more than 1000 barn owl from several release sites, and found that only about 20 of these birds were relocated still living 3 months later ... only one pair recorded to have bred in the wild post release. We found most barn owl released, all of which were very healthy, most of which were juvenile, were either killed by Great Horned Owl or by collisions with fence lines or automobiles.

Rehabilitators often release rehabilitated barn owl near forest edges, and many are released during daylight hours. Both of these circumstances promote attack by diurnal raptors. I recently witnessed such a release on T.V. from a facility in McKinney, Texas, which was aired on local Television Stations. Although I understand that camera lighting was probably the primary concern in the latter case, I instantly thought to myself "Here you go, Horned Owls, it's feeding time." As morbid as that may sound, it was probably a conservative version of what really happened. As the program's cameras followed the juvenile barn owls as they wandered around aimlessly near a thick forest edge, all daytime aerial predators watched for the owls to come to them. This scenario is not uncommon. Understanding the needs of the barn owl are important if any such release is to be considered. Further, the moderator told the audience that these juvenile owls were raised in a pen of which live mice were released to acclimate, or train the owls to hunt their natural prey. The fact is, barn owl feed on vole, not mice. Capturing a vole is a skillful art requiring special adaptations that young barn owl can only learn through experience. In any case, I call such a release the "Shock Treatment." Daytime release in a forested area away from voles and after having only known mice as prey, is a radical release and a shock to any nocturnal bird. They simply are not as instinctive as people think.

In Iowa we, too, attempted to acclimate juvenile barn owl to prey by feeding mice, until we realized that a gradual release was more justified than a certain prey acclimation. We began to release juvenile barn owl by allowing a small exit hole for them to locate in time, and slowly disperse. With this method the owls remained near the release site for up to 3 months, but upon leaving the area they died. We found that it really didn't matter what they fed upon in captivity, they were simply outnumbered by the natural elements.

In most cases, wild barn owl dispersing from a nest site will die soon after. This is mainly because suitable nest and roost cavities are not easily located, making the owls vulnerable to the natural world. However, in areas of high nest box concentrations, barn owl flourish. The average mortality rate

(percentage of those whom die before adulthood) is from 60% to 80%. The average clutch size is 4 per nest. So, only 2 owls out of two nests will become adults.

Based on these facts, I must submit that rehabilitation release of juvenile barn owl is likely to fail. Compound the stress involved with injured rehabilitated adults owls, and the likelihood of survival lessens. It is my opinion that only a large Hack Station erected in a grassy area, away from forests, and providing a gradual exit design would be anywhere near successful for juvenile barn owl. Since most rehabilitation projects could never afford to build and maintain such a structure, I further submit that releasing rehabilitated and/or orphaned barn owl is nothing more than a kind gesture, with an almost certain fatal outcome. Although it may sound cruel, rehabilitators are probably better off rejecting barn owl for care, keeping the rehabilitated owls for educational use, or euthanising each owl as it arrives at their particular care center.

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The Protection of Birds Act in the United Kingdom

From "The Barn Owl"; Bunn, Warburton, Wilson et al; Buteo Books, 1982; pp: 185-186