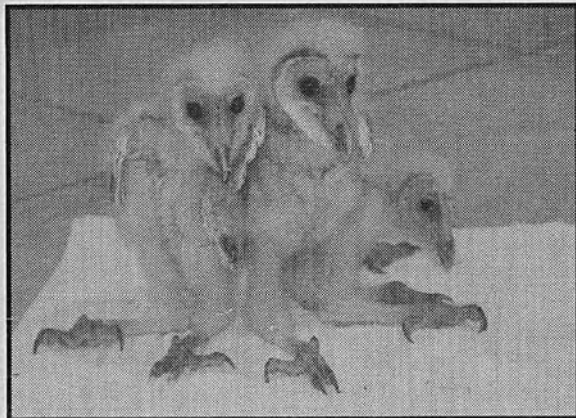


Barn Owls - free rat control!

You're fast asleep, dreaming in your bed, and suddenly you are awakened by thumping, hissing and screaming noises. No, you are not being visited by angry spirits - you have barn owls in your attic!

Some of you will nod with understanding, as you know all about the noise, smell and bulging ceiling that comes with sharing your home with barn owls. As inconvenient as it is to have them around, these fascinating creatures have a vital role in our modern, urban lives.

Many local names are given to this bird, such as devil bird, ghost owl or death owl, and his scientific name *Tyto alba*. It actually means white owl, but the common name comes from their tendency to nest in barns. These big open structures were fantastic nest sites for them, and farms usually have a healthy supply of the barn owl's staple diet of rats. As human populations increased, the owls followed the rats into our growing towns and



(Above) Owl chicks

(Below) Owl boxes protect owls from danger.



cities and made their homes in urban buildings.

Adult owls have a 4-foot wingspan and are totally silent in flight, adding to their ghostly image. They have good eyesight, but as they hunt at night, they use their incredible hearing to locate their prey. They can hear a rat's heartbeat from more than 10 feet away! They have extremely long legs with large, sharp claws on their feet - perfect for striking and grasping a scurrying rat.

The noise in the roof is made by babies who are competing for food. Both parents fly back and forth all night, bringing rat after rat for their brood. A typical nest can have up to 6 babies: that requires a lot of rats in one night. An average owl family consumes around 1,000 rats during the 3-month nesting period.

Barn owls mate for life, and can have up to 3 broods per year: that means 3,000 rats are being eaten by one pair of owls and their babies

per year. An effective, cost-free pest-control service indeed! Now think of how many rats all the barn owls in Belize City must consume. Can you imagine what the city would be like if the owls disappeared and the rats flourished?

Barn owls have a hard life in the wild, as 75% of chicks don't make it to adulthood, and adult birds live for only 2 or 3 years - even though well-cared for captive birds have been known to live for 25 years.

Humans are responsible for a lot of bird deaths. Because of superstitions, people are scared of barn owls and use rocks and slingshots to hurt them, or throw babies out onto the street to die. Owls fly low to the ground and are often hit by cars or get tangled in barbed wire. And the worst fate awaits them if an owl eats a poisoned rat - as the owl will also be poisoned.

Knowing how valuable the owl is to our environment, we should look at ways to live

in harmony with them whilst keeping them out of our homes. Owls, and other creatures, get into the roof through gaps under the eaves. If you already have owls, wait until the babies have left the nest, make sure the roof is empty and use carefully positioned chicken wire to stop the adults from returning.

Cities throughout the world encourage people to put up wooden nesting boxes on the side of buildings or on power poles to keep the owls close by. Seal up your roof-space, encourage owls to nest elsewhere, avoid using rat poison, and we will have healthy, rat-free environments.

If you have a problem with barn owls, please call us for advice. For further information about owls and advice on sealing up your home or making owl boxes visit www.belizebirdrescue.com.

Contact Belize Forestry Department on 822 1524 or Wildlife Advice Hotline (0800) 822 8888 for wildlife related issues.