

Do Barn Owls still need aid by nest box campaigns?

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At least since 50 years in all parts of Germany there have been smaller or vaster activities to help the Barn Owl by nest boxes. These activities in the beginning have been the quite considerably helpless attempt to stop the catastrophic decline of the Barn Owl. Then indeed they were a total success and so demonstrated that the lack of nesting sites had been a substantial reason for the decline of the species. As these activities had been so successful they even today are still very popular. One of the more recent ones is that of the "Sielmann foundation" 2011 in its promotion area "Wanninchen". Like in several other activities in this one there is no indication that anyone had asked in advance, whether in that region boxes had been posted already before. By such a question or certainly by the comment that all around there already were nest boxes, you could evoke enthusiasm not only in one or other subdivision of the (German) Naturschutzbund (NABU). Indeed, at least one owl box is substantial for each "animal hotel".

Lets speak about Lower Saxony

Here, in the counties Göttingen and Northeim as well as in the adjacent county Eschwege in northern Hesse, our member Horst Weiter /then Göttingen for about 30 years systematically has posted nest boxes for barn owls. This work, not only concerning the dispersion of the boxes but also in all details, was done systematically: First he looked for boxes already posted. For the boxes then installed, solid construction material was used, the posting itself was very solid. The device was: If somebody controls the box by a ladder and a headlong fall is imminent, it must be possible that he clings to it until help arrives. The box must endure that! Much attention was used for safety against martens. Since then only a few boxes have become useless and only in the case the roof above the box had been leaky for more than 10 years. The boxes are posted at the outer wall from the interior with entrance for the owls from the outside of the building.

Before this campaign only a few boxes existed and beyond it not to much were added. The total activity had the following result: In the county Northeim – which we know best – today there are about 560 boxes in 175 villages, meaning more than three per village. Considering the extension of the county of about 1.000 km² this means about one box per km². These are numbers which by themselves are not to useful. This alters if we consider only the numbers of the northern half of the county, as there the degree of controls nearly reaches 100%. Here also in the best year (2005) of the 300 boxes posted there less than 100 were occupied by barn owls. If we add the same number of boxes used by kestrels, 1/3 of all boxes were not used. Contrarily this means that also in a superior year arithmetically one box per village would have been sufficient for the barn owls. Indeed, the breeding pairs are not dispersed regularly. There are centres, where also two or three pairs bread per village, in the extreme indeed five. Such numbers naturally only may bee achieved, if there is a sufficient number of boxes.

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Only very few broods outside these boxes are known. And as nearly all church towers are made inaccessible by wire netting, only very few possibilities for free breeding exist. If barn owls in the region shall be more than a rarity, they for the future are dependant on those boxes. Since the activity of Horst Weiter additionally, at least in the county Northeim, the regular controls of these boxes as well as cleaning are organized, i.e. since about 40 years.

Some 10 years ago in a neighbouring county we could see what may be done wrongly. (Then it seemed as if there would be somebody to do the controlling and cleaning.) Some 25 more years before a considerable number of boxes had been posted. These indeed consisted of fairly light material. Later nobody had cared for them. The result: some ones already had broken, others were filled up to the upper border with pellet material.

My result is: As now as ever in our county as well as elsewhere there is a great lack of free nesting sites, barn owls are dependant on nest boxes. But in fact in many regions of Germany it is superfluous to produce nest box activities for barn owls, as such boxes in great numbers already are installed. It would be much more important to take care for the boxes present, i.e. mostly to clean them regularly. But this for all nest boxes is the same tiresome thing. Only if it has been controlled, which breeding sites for the owl already are present, one might multiply these in the case of necessity.

Some additional remarks:

Unfortunately we don't know anymore where we have read it: For the conservation of a species it is by far the most effective to invest into the optimal habitats. So one should first increase the number of breeding sites in those areas, where in the past barn owls had been frequent and had bred from time to time, and not post boxes in localities, where 30 years ago in fact one pair had made a breeding attempt. Certainly this would not harm and gives good opportunities to kestrels and jackdaws, but by no means it is effective barn owl protection.

If somewhere the idea rises finally to do something for the barn owls, at first there should be examined, how many boxes already exist and which more natural breeding sites still are present or again could be made accessible. If it then seems that a nest box activity is inevitable, then the procedure should be as follows: At first some boxes should be posted at sites, where traces prove earlier broods or where eminent traces prove the wintering of owls. Only after these boxes have been used for breeding, it might be useful to install a further box at a distance of 3-5 km. To post two boxes from the beginning for eventual second broods indeed may have still more advantages: fights with kestrels then are less probable. And the owls prefer a dry box for their second broods. And if this box is in the same building, the search for the owls as well as for the owl protectors is much easier. In this case the owls do have a better chance to intercalate their second brood with their first one and so to finish earlier, say before the unfavourable autumn.

Before any nest box activity we should ask ourselves, which aim we do have: a minimal offer or at least a bit more. For a minimal offer it mostly is sufficient if many church towers are at disposition and even by a box posted there. (Dear colleague DIEHL: The better if the breeding chambers you prefer can be installed.) These chambers as well as the open breeding sites in towers really do have three advantages compared to boxes: They don't rot, they most rarely or even not at all must be cleaned, and for the owlets they offer the possibility for a branchling-stage, that means to climb around and to use their wings.

Or it might be that we want to know, which numbers of breeding pairs barn owls reach if there is an luxurious offer of boxes or vice versa, which density of pairs the present agriculture still does permit. And also, if by ringing questions in soziobiology, site-fidelity, and dispersal will be studied, powering as done by HORST WEITER in our county may b useful. Even if it was not his aim he has produced best conditions for our work on these subjects. Many thanks to you, Mr. WEITER!