

Barn Owl Monitoring in the Lower Mainland - 2014 Update

Thanks to the co-operation of land-owners like you I've been able to monitor Barn Owl nest sites in the Lower Mainland since 2007. I have mostly monitored how many eggs are laid and how many owlets eventually fledge. However over the years we have collected blood and looked at residues of rat poisons in Barn Owlets, and also compared the genome of Barn Owlets in the Lower Mainland to other populations in the USA. Andrew Huang, a Master's student at UBC was in charge of the genome project, and he recently found that the different populations of Barn Owls turned out to be closely related, so there seems to be a lot of migrating going on.

However, last time I sent out an update on our project was back in 2009, so I'm overdue in sending out a little status report to everyone involved.

Barn Owl Nesting and Breeding in 2014

In total 42 nest sites were monitored in 2014, of which 28 bred successfully, 2 pairs also had a 2nd clutch of owlets. We had a couple of early breeders in Delta this year, and two clutches of chicks were ready to fledge in February, which meant the eggs must have been laid in the beginning of December 2013. However, after this initial spur of two early breeding pairs, it was quiet for a while and most of the chicks fledged in June and July. The average number of chicks fledged this year was 1.9 chicks per nest, which is lower than the annual average of about 2.5 chicks fledging. The lower number this year was mostly a result of 5 nests where the eggs never hatched. The adults were still present at these sites, so for some reason, the adults decided against continuing incubating the eggs, which does happen at times when the weather is really bad or there is not enough prey around. The highest number of fledglings from a monitored nest site this year was 5 owlets from a nest site in Delta.

Barn Owl Threatened Species

Many of you are already aware that Barn Owls are in the process of being upgraded to a "*threatened species*" in Western Canada. This is mainly a consequence of habitat and nest site loss due to urban development, encroaching on rural acreages and farmland.



Development also means an increase in roads and traffic, and Barn Owls are at risk of getting hit by vehicles when hunting at night as they hunt low to the ground, which



Recently fledged owlet sitting in tree outside nest box. Picture taken by Lois Williams.

makes them very prone to being struck by traffic when crossing roads or hunting the roadside verges for rodents. We are also finding residues of rat poison in dead Barn Owls, maybe not enough to kill them outright, but it could potentially make them sick so that it is difficult for them to hunt or makes them more prone to getting hit by cars.

Ensuring that we have enough grass fields and field margins for the Barn Owls to hunt in, along with the presence of good nesting opportunities are of importance if we still want to have a viable Barn Owl population in the Lower Mainland. If you have any questions about best land management practices, nest box installation or anything Barn Owl related, feel free to phone or email me anytime. I also monitor Barn Owl road mortality, so if you do

see a dead Barn Owl along the road, I would definitely appreciate this information too, location and date of the deceased Barn Owl.

We lost four nest sites this year, one old barn fell down in Delta after the heavy snowfall we had in March. Two other barns in Delta were taken down as part of road expansion and industrial development. Luckily, those two barns were compensated with four Barn Owl nest boxes on poles, so we hope this will allow the two Barn Owl pairs to stay in the area. One old farm site in Surrey was also demolished.

To compensate for the loss of nest sites in Delta, The Delta Farmland and Wildlife Trust, has a nest box program, and on a volunteer basis we do install boxes for owners that want a Barn Owl nest box on their property. This year we installed four boxes, and I am hoping to expand the nest box program into Surrey and Langley in 2015.

Again, thank you so much for your co-operation and for letting me have access to your barn. Without your co-operation my research would not have been possible. If you have any further questions about my project or Barn Owls, feel free to email me, sofi.hindmarch@gmail.com or phone 778-238-7380.