

THE WINGED CAT

Barn owls can be found in varying numbers over most of North America. During daylight hours, they roost in large tree cavities or under the eaves of quiet, deserted buildings. Accustomed to humans, they will tolerate a moderate level of activity as long as they are not threatened.

At night, the barn owl, like others of its family, leaves its roost to search for food. Armed with highly developed hearing and a keen sense of night vision, it is able to locate and seize the smallest prey in almost total darkness. Refined wing and feather structures render it virtually silent in flight, leaving little doubt about the source of its well deserved nickname, "The Cat With Wings."

WHERE AND HOW BARN OWLS LIVE

Depending upon weather and climate, barn owls nest in February and March, laying a clutch of three to eight eggs (most commonly five or six) in a cozy, secluded cavity or shelf some distance above the ground. Incubation lasts about 32 days, and the young leave the nest after 10 to 12 weeks. By May, the young have usually flown, and the remaining adults may or may not attempt a second brood, depending upon food source and supply, and climate conditions.

BARN OWL CUISINE

Barn owls are world class rodent controllers, hunting gophers, rats and mice from dusk until dawn. The owls seek their prey either from a perched position or on the wing, looking for hungry rodents to emerge from their burrows to browse on tender greens, seeds or small insects. Each adult will consume one gopher per night, while a nest of seven-week-old young may eat from 2 to 5 each. Parents and chicks may consume as many as 1,000 rodents before the young leave the nest. This makes the barn owl a valuable ally of the farmer who is battling rodent infestations.

BUILDING AND LOCATING A NEST BOX

Barns and seldom-used farm outbuildings usually satisfy the owl's requirements for nesting sites. However, barn owls can easily be attracted into a vineyard or orchard if the requirements of adequate food supply and nesting sites are met. Any sites to be provided should be in place by December, as the owls begin site selection early in January.

Vineyards accommodate barn owls quite well, especially if the nest box design includes protection from the sun because young owls can be sensitive to excessive heat. One such design is shown here.

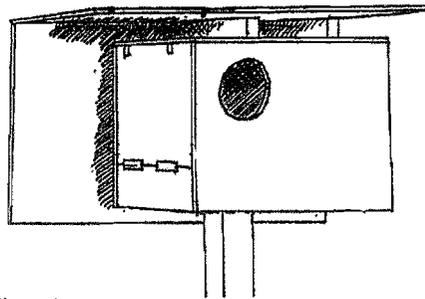


Figure 1. Barn owl nest box on pole showing shade baffles, and cleanout door.

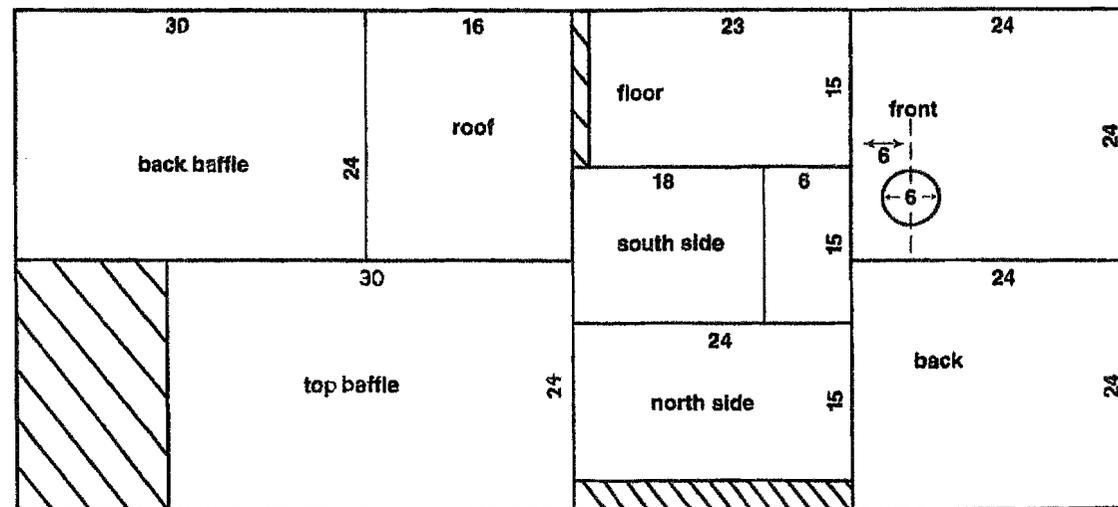


Figure 2. Cutting plan for 1/2-inch CDX plywood sheet (dimensions in inches).

The barn owl will travel some distance to hunt, allowing a farmer some flexibility in his choice of nest box locations. To the extent possible, locate nest boxes in areas of low human activity, and twelve feet or higher above the ground. Boxes may be hung in trees, although predation by squirrels and raccoons is not uncommon.

The following recommendations are based upon the experience of Lodi area vineyardists:

Build a box at least 24" x 12" x 24" high.

Include plywood sunshields for back and top.

Note: The sunshields are not needed in cooler climates like the San Francisco area.

The entrance hole should be roughly six inches in diameter.

Include a cleanout door for annual cleaning (prior to December).

Mount the box 12 feet above ground on a 16 foot redwood 4x4.

When possible, locate the doorway away from prevailing winds.