



# The Winchester Star

## Box program helps barn owls hunting homes

- By CATHY KUEHNER | The Winchester Star
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Wildlife veterinarian Belinda Burwell, of Wildlife Veterinary Care, holds a barn owl she is about to release at Walnut Hall Farm near Boyce. She has been rehabilitating the owl at her facility. A barn box was installed in one of the old silos in the background.



Wildlife veterinarian Belinda Burwell releases a barn owl recently at Walnut Hall Farm near Boyce.

- Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star





Wildlife veterinarian Belinda Burwell (from left), of Wildlife Veterinary Care, and Virginia Master Naturalists Liz Dennison and Dave Cazenias pose with a barn owl Burwell was about to release at Walnut Hall Farm. Cazenias and Dennison installed a barn owl box in the silo behind them.





Virginia Master Naturalists Dave Cazenias (from left) and Liz Dennison talk with wildlife veterinarian Belinda Burwell, of Wildlife Veterinary Care, just before the release of a barn owl Burwell has been rehabilitating. Cazenias and Dennison installed a barn owl box in an old silo on the Walnut Hall Farm near Boyce.

• Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star

**BOYCE** — They have faces everyone can love. What they don't have is enough of their favorite habitat.

Barn owls — recognizable by their distinctive, pale, heart-shaped faces and long, lanky legs — are also called ghost owls because of their extremely secretive nature. Their ideal habitat is quiet barns and silos where dropped livestock feed attracts the mice and rats that barn owls eat almost exclusively. They also fly low over hayfields, searching for voles, a relative of the mouse.

Barn owls are also particular about where they roost.

So, wildlife advocates are on a mission to find old barns and silos and install nest boxes in order to preserve the barn owl.

“Barn owls populations are in decline. It is a species of concern in Virginia, and it is endangered in some states like Pennsylvania and New Jersey,” said veterinarian Dr. Belinda Burwell, a wildlife rehabilitator and founder and director of Wildlife Veterinary Care in Millwood.

Burwell said the barn owl population decline is caused by lost habitat — barns and silos being demolished to make way for development — as well as changing farming practices such as modern monoculture farming, in which a single crop is grown.

Additionally, rodenticides used to kill mice and rats also poison animals that eat mice and rats.

“Poison is one of the biggest threats to barn owls,” she said.

Barn owls are strictly rodent eaters, making them an efficient and effective form of pest control for farmers.

“Forget chemicals. Get a barn owl,” said Burwell.

Barn owls like hollow trees, too, but trees leave them more vulnerable to predators.

“Barn owls like old barns with feed for cattle, horses or chickens and lots of rodents running around,” Burwell said, noting it is difficult to get an accurate barn owl count because of their elusive nature.

Burwell, who has cared for wild animals for more than 30 years, most often sees screech owls and barred owls in her wildlife rehabilitation center. Occasionally, the center receives great horned owls, “which will eat anything, including other owls.”

In May, Burwell received two baby barn owls found on the ground where a barn had been torn down in Nokesville.

Burwell reached out to Loudoun County resident Liz Dennison, who has been working with birds of prey for a decade as an educator, rehabilitator and falconer. Dennison is a Virginia Master Naturalist — a statewide volunteer group — and is the leader of the group’s Barn Owl and Kestrel Nest Box Project.

“The nest box gives the owls the privacy they like and protects their eggs from predators,” Dennison said. “I’m on a mission with my barn owl boxes.”

Burwell, Dennison and Dave Cazenias, another Virginia Master Naturalist, met one evening last week to release one of the two now-mature barn owls in a barn near two silos at a farm in Boyce.

The property owner had heard about the barn owl nest box project and offered the buildings as a habitat for the bird.

Cazenias had earlier constructed a nest box for the owl and installed it high up inside a silo.

Plywood nest boxes are about 23-by-16 inches and 12 inches tall and have two chambers inside: one for nesting and one for roosting. Oval openings are just big enough for barn owls, but too small for most predators.

Even though there was a nest box in a silo, Burwell released the owl in the big barn nearby. It quickly flew up into the dark rafters and out of sight.

“These owls don’t like to be seen,” Burwell said. “It will stay up in the rafters and may not use the nest box until next spring when she’s ready to lay eggs.”

Barn owls may have two to 12 babies each year.

Barn owls are found around the world, and the overall population is good, Dennison said. “But they are losing their nesting sites in Virginia. So, we are willing to put up nest boxes anywhere people will allow us.”

The Barn Owl and Kestrel Nest Box Project is all volunteer.

“We’re looking for barns and silos that are lightly or rarely used,” Dennison said. “There is no cost for our time, though we’d like to be reimbursed for materials. Boxes aren’t expensive, about \$35 to \$60.”

Plans for nesting boxes are also available online, and Dennison said making boxes is a great project for Boy or Girl Scouts.

“Boxes are a start,” Dennison said. “The owl may not find it the first or second year, but they will find it. What helps is multiple roosting sites, like the farm in Boyce, where there is a barn and silos.”

After releasing the barn owl in Boyce, Burwell and Dennison released that owl's sister at a farm near the Clarke-Warren county line the following evening. They will go back to the farms, perhaps during the winter, to look for signs that the owls have settled in.

There are no guarantees where wildlife is concerned, but Burwell believes, "If you build it, the owls will come."



Read more about the Barn Owl and Kestrel Nest Box Project and find building plans at [secretgardenbirdsandbees.com](https://secretgardenbirdsandbees.com). Follow Secret Garden Birds and Bees on Facebook.

Find the Wildlife Veterinary Care center at [wildlifevetcare.com](https://wildlifevetcare.com). Call the center at 540-664-9494. Reach Burwell at [belinda@wildlifevetcare.org](mailto:belinda@wildlifevetcare.org).

— Contact Cathy Kuehner at [ckuehner@winchesterstar.com](mailto:ckuehner@winchesterstar.com)