

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Farmers' grazing system helps barn owls

BY CHARLIE RAHM

WARREN County farmers Ben and David Avis went to USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service in 2001 looking for advice about how to improve their pastures. What they found was that cattle aren't the only animals to benefit from the rotational grazing system they built over the last 15 years.

This past May, representatives of the World Bird Sanctuary delivered the fifth pair of American barn owls to the Avis farm for release into the wild. The young owls were Nos. 1,000 and 1,001 that the St. Louis sanctuary raised and released in an attempt to increase the population of barn owls. The program appears to be working. Just four years ago, barn owls were on the endangered species list. Today they are listed as being a "special concern."

Jeffrey Meshach, director of the World Bird Sanctuary, says the Avis farm is attractive for two reasons: first because of Ben's interest in helping the birds, and second because of the habitat at the Avis farm.

Creating an environment

Aided by financial and technical assistance from the NRCS and the

Key Points

- NRCS program repopulates barn owls.
- Grazing system provides ideal barn owl habitat.
- Sanctuary has released 1,000-plus barn owls.

local soil and water conservation district, the brothers have created 35 paddocks on their 100 acres of grazing land.

Their cattle are rotated through the paddocks on a regular basis. This grazing method, often referred to as management-intensive grazing, results in cattle evenly grazing a paddock for a few days, then being moved to another paddock. The method prevents the grasses in each paddock from being grazed too low, and it gives the grass time to adequately recover before the cattle are allowed in that paddock again.

It's a method that is good for the grass, good for the cattle and good for owls.

"Because we do that, we have high-growth paddocks and low-growth paddocks, and there are a multitude of mice in them," Ben says.

Meshach explains that the high-growth paddocks help the mice reproduce and grow, and



FOR THE OWL: Warren County farmer Ben Avis (left) and Jeffrey Meshach, director of the World Bird Sanctuary, get ready to release an owl at the Avis family farm. This is the fifth release at the site.

when they move into the low-growth paddocks, it is easy for the owls to prey upon them.

"The owls have a fairly specific habitat that they need, and what Ben has here with his grazing land is pretty ideal," Meshach says. "If land is overgrazed, the owls don't have the food sources that they need."

Another benefit that Avis

offers the owls is the 25 nesting boxes he has installed in the woods on his farm and surrounding farms.

He also constructed a flight cage in the loft of a barn on the farm. The young owls stay in the flight cage for five days to get acclimated before a window is opened that allows them access to the wild.

Heart for the owl

Ben, a retired Warrenton High School science teacher, says he is honored that the World Bird Sanctuary chose his farm for its

milestone barn owl release. The sanctuary's founding director, Walt Crawford, started the owl release program in the early 1980s.

"Sadly, Walt died in July 2015, but I know he would be quite happy to see the 1,000th barn owl released," Meshach says.

And Ben says he is quite happy to do his part to advance the cause.

"I would be thrilled if the culmination of all this would be to have a breeding population of barn owls here," he says.

Rahm is a public affairs officer for USDA NRCS in Columbia.



TRACKING PROGRESS: Jeffrey Meshach and Dawn Griffard of the World Bird Sanctuary band a barn owl before release.

Rebuilding the population

SINCE 1981, World Bird Sanctuary has been breeding and releasing American barn owls in the state of Missouri due to a drastic drop in overall population, but more specifically in the Midwest region.

The American barn owl is key to a balanced ecosystem here in the United States. They are incredibly important to rodent control; each adult bird consumes an average of 2,000 mice each year.

The drop in population is attributed to two main problems: secondary poisoning from domestic and commercial rodent poisons, and habitat loss (older trees and open fields of short grass with hedgerows). The World Bird Sanctuary solution to these problems is education about alternatives to rodent control, education about and construction of nest boxes, and raising them to release. To boost the wild population while educating the public about their fragile existence, World Bird Sanctuary has bred and released barn owls yearly for the past 35 years.