

June 2012

# BUILD AN OWL BOX



# BACKGROUND

Owls, particularly the Spotted Eagle Owls and to a lesser extent the Barn Owls, are surprisingly common in built up areas. Their abundance is due to their adaptability and the fact that they feed on a wide range of prey. They are easily overlooked, however, as they are nocturnal, well camouflaged and tend to roost in areas where they are difficult to see. If you want to check if you have owls in your area, the following is helpful:

- Owls usually cause great concern amongst other smaller birds who tend to gather in large noisy groups whenever an owl is discovered. These groups, known as mobbing parties, serve to warn all the small birds in the area of the presence of a predator.
- Birds, especially bulbuls, are particularly good at locating owls – and are very noisy when they do! Spending a few evenings wandering around the area listening for the excited chattering of bulbuls and other small birds will soon indicate if there are owls in the area. You may also find them at dusk when the owls themselves often call.
- Another way of detecting the presence of owls in the areas is by way of their droppings and pellets. Owls often use the same tree to roost in for long periods and there is a build up of pellets and 'whitewash', the toothpaste-like owl droppings, below the roost.

To attract owls to your garden, you don't need to introduce food, as it should already be there. What you need to do is provide accommodation! You can do this in the form of an owl-breeding box.

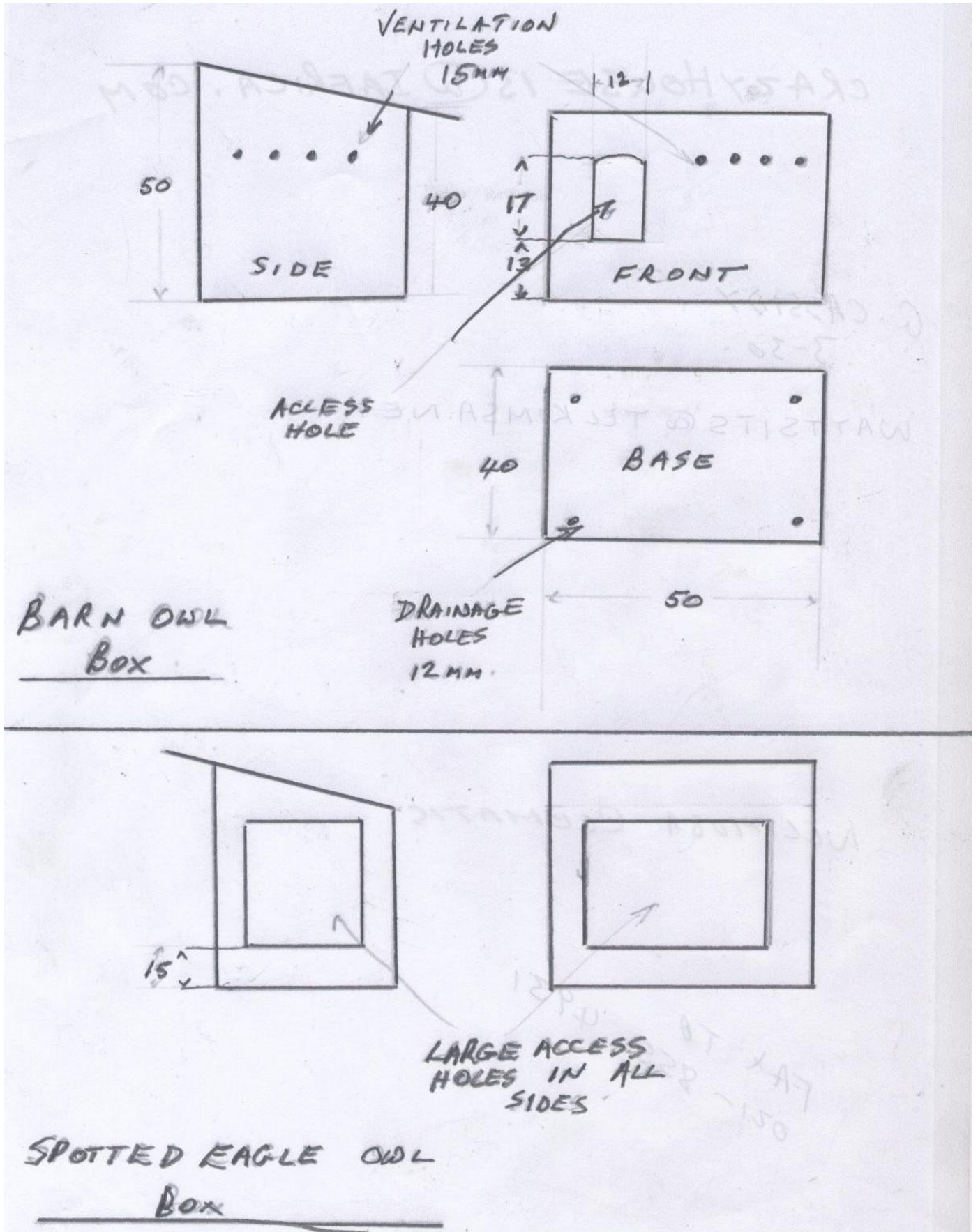
Most owls other than ground nesting owls are always looking for old nests to take over or a nest site in the form of shelter, whether it be in a hole in a tree or an old building or a ledge on a cliff face.

Two species that especially like the owl boxes are Spotted Eagle Owls and Barn Owls. If you live in a built up area, the owl that you are most likely to attract is the Spotted Eagle Owl, if you live on a plot or in a rural area the Barn Owl could be your welcome visitor.

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*Acknowledgements: This 'How To' has been compiled from the WESSA Western Cape website articles, 'Construction of owl nesting boxes' and 'Owl box plan'. Special thanks to Gerry Cassidy who compiled both the text and plans that can be found here and on the WESSA Western Cape website. Gerry makes the boxes for whoever wants them and is also happy to help with advice to anyone who needs it (e-mail [gcassi@netactive.co.za](mailto:gcassi@netactive.co.za)). Thank you also to WESSA member, Mike St Quinton, for the front cover photograph.*

# Building an Owl Nesting Box



## Construction

Owl nesting boxes are constructed from standard, tongue and groove pine ceiling boards, on a 30mm x 30mm pine frame. Ask your timber supplier to supply the wood in untreated form, as household timber is normally supplied having been treated with poisonous insect repellent.

The dimensions on the plans on the previous page are all in centimetres except when otherwise shown. The two types of box are in essence the same, with the exceptions that the access hole is restricted to one small hole in the case of the Barn Owl, and large access holes in all four sides in the case of the Spotted Eagle Owl. In both cases, the bottom of the access holes should be located in such a position that the baby birds cannot fall out of the box. A small landing area (15cm x 10cm) should be attached to the Barn Owl box at the base of the access hole. The roof slopes towards the small front in the Barn Owl box, whilst the roof slopes the other way in the case of the Spotted Eagle Owl box. In both cases, the roof overhangs the sides by 5cm to give more weather protection. The wood in both types of box is treated on the outside only, with any good lead-free preservative. Some people say not to treat the timber but one can use Woodcock 10, an excellent outdoor all weather product.

To aid installation, round-headed bolts can be placed through the frame at the rear of the boxes.

As pine needles do not rot, they are found to be the best nesting material with which to cover the base of the box. Gravel would also be fine as the majority of Spotted Eagle Owls nest on the ground and not in trees. It is important to make water drain holes in the base of the box.

## Installation

The general rule with both types of box is to place them where the owl would normally nest. Therefore, in the case of the Barn Owl, the ideal place would be a barn or loft where the bird will have free access. If this type of location is not available then the box can be fixed to the side of a building, and be more than 4 metres above ground level. In practice, it has been found that the Barn Owl nesting box can also be placed on a pole or in a tree close to a good food source. In the case of the Spotted Eagle Owl, the bird will normally nest in an open fork in a tree. The nesting box should therefore be placed in a similar environment.



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