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Creating Owl Friendly Children within Owl Friendly Environments

OWL ADMISSION TOOLKIT



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BACKGROUND

In the interest of owl conservation in urban Gauteng, the owlproject.org aims to facilitate a more streamlined approach to the collection of and the handling of owls within townships in South Africa. The toolkit is designed to combine the footprint of the NSPCA, SPCA branches and owlproject.org's capacity to collect, educate and resolve owl - township resident conflicts.

IMPLEMENTATION

The owlproject.org has been dealing with human – owl related conflict resolution since 2002. Between 2015 and 2016 alone, we experienced a 15% increase in the number of calls received from members of the public relating to owl and owl-related issues.

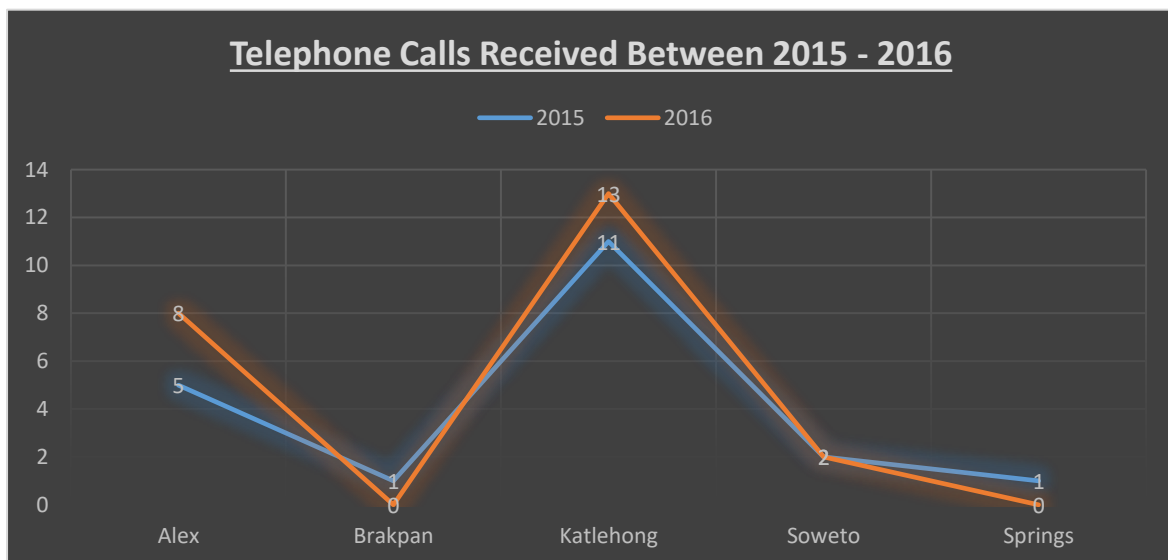


Figure 1: Telephone Calls Received Between 2015 - 2016 for Owl Related Issues



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COLLECTION

When dealing with owl collections and assistance to township residents it is important to respond to them as quickly as possible. There are two primary reasons for this. Firstly, if the owl is injured, a prolonged or delayed collection or rescue will result in a delayed prognosis and a delay in medication or procedure. The consequence of this delay generally affects potential recuperation and ultimately rehabilitation.

“Animals with injuries like complex fractures or deep tissue wounds not only had poor release rates, but also had longer periods in care, which raises questions about the welfare of such casualties. Poor triage equals poor welfare...” (A. Grogan, A. Kelly. 2013).

Secondly, in townships, the delayed response to a call for assistance can result in the township resident choosing a far less environmentally friendly alternative to their owl “problem”. This can include, sealing the owls into the roof which will lead to their death, killing the owls, spraying the owls with an insecticide, or removing the owls forcibly.

For these reasons we suggest that, where possible, participating SPCA branches refer calls relating to the removal or collection of owls or concerned inquiries relating to owls from township residents to owlproject.org at their earliest convenience.

The contact details for owlproject.org are: **011 791 7326** or email us at info@owlproject.org.

For emergencies and after hours cases, please use our cell phone number **076 360 9072**.

Where the collection of owls by an SPCA inspector or employee is undertaken please find our **“3-Step Protocol for Handling and Collecting Owls”** on page 4. This is our rough guide, if there are any omissions or things that you would like to add, please contact us.

Where the SPCA branch or inspector admits or collects owls, please also see the **“Safety Precautions when Dealing with Owl Admissions and Owl Handling”** on page 5.



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3-STEP PROTOCOL FOR HANDLING AND COLLECTING OWLS

The conservation efforts of owlproject.org are designed to facilitate a symbiotic relationship between owls and township residents. The removal of owls from a territory and then attempting to re-home them into another territory is without value. Wherever possible, owls should be left in the area and location in which they occurred. Townships around Gauteng are very probably the stronghold for Barn owl (*Tyto alba*) populations in the province. The reason for the high population densities of owls in townships is simple – RATS. Barn owls are voracious predators of rodents and rodent populations within South African Townships are high. Although we may feel that owls would be better suited to pristine environments or game reserves, this is a fallacy and this fallacy is clearly illustrated by the number of owls which presently occur in Townships.

We have distinguished three approaches that we employ when dealing with township resident – owl related conflict. These are listed as options below. Our first option being our “first prize”, down to option 3 which is viewed as our “contingency plan”.

Option 1 – First Prize:

The priority of owlproject.org is to leave the owls/owlets in the environment in which they were found. We facilitate this by persuading residents to leave the owls/owlets at the site, this is undertaken through educating residents on the value of owls in the control of rodents. In addition, the owlets are usually only a few days/weeks from fledging and if they are left undisturbed, they will fledge without incident. Often by showing the concerned resident the numerous owl pellets in the roof and then illustrating their contents – RATS - we are able to buy the owls a little more time. Once the owlets have successfully fledged, we undertake to seal the roof and position an owl box on site.

Option 2 – Second Prize:

If the residents are reluctant to leave the owls in the roof, we advise the removal of the owlets from the roof, and the placement of these owlets into an owl box on the premises. We will thereafter seal the roof. This will prevent the adult from re-using the roof site, but they will continue to raise their clutch and additionally, the owl pair will utilise the owl box in subsequent years. Notwithstanding the disturbance involved in this option, it is brief and once the owlets are placed in the owl box, the parents usually re-enter the box very shortly thereafter. We undertake the re-locations of owlets into the owl boxes just before sunset, which allows the parents to return to their clutch as soon as it gets dark and this minimizes the time that the adult owl(s) spend exposed in the open or away from their chicks.



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Option 3 – Contingency Plan:

Occasionally residents - in spite of our education attempts - are adamant that they do not want owls on their premises. In this case we remove the owls/owlets and use one of our participating schools within the area to undertake an owl release from the school. The benefits of this option is that it educates the local children and their parents on the value of owls in their environment and also allows the owls to remain in an area that is familiar to them. For more on the school owl programme please visit www.owlproject.org

SAFETY PRECAUTIONS TO FOLLOW FOR OWL ADMISSIONS AND OWL HANDLING: PRE-ADMISSION

When a member of the public calls to report a compromised owl, it is important to gather as much case history as possible. Required information includes:

- Exact location of owl – this information is important to facilitate a timeous rescue and also for returning the owl to that territory if possible.
- Reason for the call (is the owl injured, in danger or requiring relocation?).
- If the owl is in danger, ask if the caller can assist and give the necessary guidance (keep bird safe, place in a box using a towel etc.).
- The time the owl was first found.

The above information is important because it gives a vital insight into how the owl should be treated. For example, if it was found alongside a road we will know to examine the bird for fractures as well as impact trauma. If the owl was removed by a member of the public from a roof, it may have injured or fractured legs. With this information, we are better prepared to assess the case and give first aid treatment before transporting the owl to our avian specialist veterinarian, if needed.

When dealing with such calls it is also important to reassure the caller that help will be on the way as timeously as possible.

ADMISSION

At times, the public will bring rescued owls to their local SPCA branch. It is important to note that when this happens, owlproject.org should be contacted timeously. This will facilitate prompt first aid or veterinary care that may be needed in the case of a dehydrated, injured or compromised bird. Our personnel will collect cases as quickly as possible so it is not necessary for SPCA staff to feed or hydrate the owl. The owlproject.org staff have



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completed the IWRC Basic Wildlife Rehabilitation Course and we work with avian specialist veterinarians who treat all injured or poisoned owls. Guidelines for owl admissions at SPCA branches:

- Gather as much history as possible from the rescuer (i.e. where, how and when the owl was found).
- Stress can kill an already compromised owl, so try to minimise noise levels.
- Place the owl into a cardboard box (with ventilation holes) that has a towel on the bottom (owls can injure themselves and damage their feathers in wire or mesh cages).
- Stress levels are further reduced and the owl kept calm by being placed in the dark.
- As far as possible, keep the owl away from domestic animals and noise, to minimise stress levels.

It is important to practice caution when handling owls to ensure admitted owls do not suffer injuries or stress. Guidelines for handling owls:

- If an owl is admitted to an SPCA branch we advise that the owl be placed in a cardboard box with a towel on the bottom until the owl is collected by a member of owlproject.org.
- All handling and moving of owls should be done in a room with closed windows and doors to ensure that the owl(s) do not escape.
- A clean towel or cloth can be used to hold the owl(s). The towel should be wrapped around the body of the owl with one hand securing the feet which prevents the owl from striking with its sharp talons.
- Once you have the owl in your hand, gently place the owl head first into the cardboard box.
- Once the owl is in the box, close the box immediately.

For a video on how to handle an owl, please view this [video](#) or visit our [YouTube page](#) (owlproject.org) for a video showing how to handle an owl.

POST – ADMISSION

Following admission and physical examination, any injured, poisoned or compromised owls will be treated by one of the avian specialist veterinarians who support owlproject.org. The next step is for the owls to be ringed by qualified ringers using the [SAFRING](#) system. Rings are an important source of information should an owl be recovered post release. From the ring recovery data, we can determine where the owl was ringed and released, how far the owl has travelled and the length of time this has taken.



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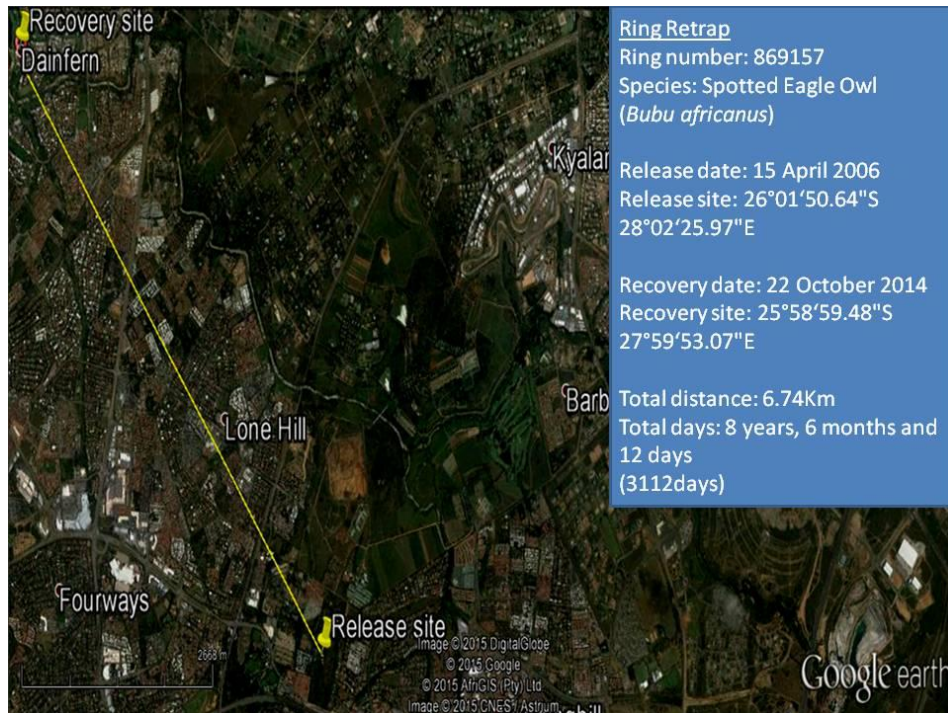


Figure 2: Owl Recovery Map

For more information on the Project, visit our website www.owlproject.org or view our Facebook page; [Township Owl Project NPC](#). We hope that this toolkit is a valuable addition to your skill set. Good luck and please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or queries regarding this document or any owl – related issues.

The following are scientific research papers that could be of interest to you:

[A Review of RSPCA Research into Wildlife Rehabilitation](#)

[Factors that Can Be Used to Predict Release Rates for Wildlife Casualties](#)

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REFERENCES

A. Grogan, A. Kelly. 2013. A Review of RSPCA Research into Wildlife