

INTO THE WILD

CONSERVATIONIST HIGHLIGHTS THE BENEFITS OF OWLS TO WEXFORD FARMERS IN FIGHT AGAINST RODENTS

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- By AMY LEWIS

CONSERVATIONIST and lawyer Ronan Hannigan recently released two long-eared owls in the Gorey area, several months after they were found injured elsewhere.

Ronan, who is the founder of various conservation charities such as The Curlew Trust, also hopes to release barn owls in the near future. According to him, owls can prove very beneficial to farmers who wish to keep rat numbers at a minimum.

‘By encouraging rat-eaters such as owls onto our land, we will be able to keep rat levels low and in turn, enjoy these beautiful birds,’ he explained.

However, rat poison, also known as rodenticide, remains a constant threat to owls and other birds who may ingest contaminated prey. According to a recent study on 70 Irish barn owls conducted by Birdwatch Ireland, over 80 per cent had detectable traces of the four main toxic chemicals used in rat poison. In an effort to preserve this species and other birds, Ronan is calling on local farmers to reduce or eliminate the use of rat bait in favour of ‘natural’ control methods.

‘We should allow natural controllers to do their job. To do this, one can buy barn owl boxes which will attract various species of owl, along with other rat predators such as kestrels,’ he said. ‘They are already being used extensively in the UK.’

Other animals including buzzards, red kites and pine martins are also praised by Ronan as ‘good ratters’.

‘Buzzards are beginning to come into Wexford and I actually recently saw two in Gorey,’ he said.

Ronan isn’t against all commercial methods. According to him, live traps can be also be used alongside natural control methods.

‘They are very effective,’ he said. ‘Live traps ensure that dead rats aren’t being left around the place and contaminating things. People can catch them and decide themselves what they wish to do with them.’

John Lusby, Raptor Conservation Officer with Birdwatch Ireland feels that there are certain circumstances that require the use of rat poison such as cases of serious infestation. However, he believes that the public need to change their attitudes towards the substance as it is often misused.

‘Overuse may have a negative effect on our wildlife,’ he explained. ‘Also, overusing poisons may cause rats to become resistant to them.’

For John, rat poison should be the last resort for farmers or others with a vermin problem.

‘First, people should reduce the suitability of their environment for rats by doing things such as clearing any spilled foodstuffs, introducing predators such as cats and using live traps,’ he explained. ‘These methods won’t have knock-on consequences for other species.’

Together with Michael O’ Clery, John conducted a study on Irish barn owls in 2014 which found that rodenticides are one of their biggest threats. He advocates that

‘increasing best practice rodent control’ is absolutely essential in reducing the threat of secondary poisoning to the species.

The Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use (CRRU) was established in response to such calls for a more responsible use of rodenticides. While supporters of the code are aware that rats spread disease and must be controlled, they are also conscious of the harm that poisons can cause for wildlife. According to Éanna Ní Lamhna, Communications Officer with CRRU, a balance can be made by following the CRRU Code.

‘The CRRU code contains seven steps for people,’ she explained. ‘We want to encourage them to be proactive.’

These steps include planning, recording where poison is placed, using multiple baiting points, responsible disposal of bodies, hiding bait from other creatures, inspecting bait regularly and removing bait when necessary.

GLAS – the new Agri-Environment Scheme – specifies that participants should comply with the CRRU Code in their daily farming activities. Teagasc also recommends that farmers follow the CRRU Code to ensure that the threat of secondary exposure to wildlife associated with rodent control measures is minimised.

A leaflet detailing the CRRU Code was distributed to over 27,000 Irish farmers in July.