

In Africa, owl activists work to overcome fear of reviled birds

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.20.15

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Two owlets rest in a wooden box after being rescued from a township by EcoSolutions, a South African urban ecology company, that places owls in South African townships to control the rampant rat population. Many Africans are superstitious about owls, but EcoSolutions is working to help people understand there is nothing to be afraid of, and much to appreciate, about the birds. Photo: Robyn Dixon/Los Angeles Times/TNS

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa — Allyn Bagu lay in bed, listening to the creatures nesting under the roof of her new apartment in suburban Johannesburg, South Africa. She could hear them scrabbling around and their haunting screeches.

One day, her sister-in-law saw one of them outside their third-floor window and screamed. It was an owl.

“I was thinking of moving,” Bagu said, shuddering. “It’s bad luck.”

Owls are reviled in many parts of Africa as foretellers of death. In South Africa, many believe that when an owl lands on the roof and hoots, it has been sent by a sangoma, or witch doctor, delivering a fatal curse.

Bagu's husband called EcoSolutions, a company with a "Ghostbusters"-style relocation service.

Trying To Ease Old Superstitions

It turned out there were 10 owls in Bagu's dark, warm attic. Owl catcher Hussein Mduduzi, jumping from roof strut to roof strut, managed to catch two owlets, but the eight grown owls flew off.

Mduduzi descended, gently carrying the owlets in a box. The youngsters, their baby fluff half replaced by feathers, looked tatty and nervous. Their heart-shaped faces swiveled about, gazing with large, dark eyes at the creature who'd taken them from their home. Bagu's tiny daughter burst into tears, ran and snuggled up to her mother.

Tendai Remwa, EcoSolutions' manager, tried to calm down Bagu and her daughter.

"These owls are just like any other birds," she said. "It's very bad to take the babies away from their mothers."

She explained that the mature owls would return unless the entry holes were closed and owl nesting boxes were installed nearby. Bagu looked unsure, but anything was better than having them in the attic.

Remwa, an owl lover, hopes to erase old superstitions about owls. The company's nonprofit Township Owls Project is using the birds to help control the large, and at times dangerous, rat population in crowded townships, and educating people about their value.

"If somebody is afraid, I explain, 'I'm African, like you. I deal with owls every single day. Nothing bad has happened to me or my family.'"

Project Teaches Children How To Care For Owls

When residents refuse to accept the installation of nesting boxes for the owlets taken from their ceilings, EcoSolutions rescues them to prevent them from being killed. They are handed to the Township Owls Project, to be placed in nesting boxes in township schools, which are deserted and peaceful at night.

Schoolchildren are taught how to feed and care for the owls, in the hope they'll grow to understand owls and even become their protectors. Since the project began in 1998, about 84,000 children have been involved, feeding and caring for owls.

Six years ago, Lerato Ramathopa, then 13, announced to her family that she would be caring for barn owls at school.

“They said to me I was going to die soon and I was going to bring bad luck on the family,” she said.

The wondrous weeks that followed changed her life. She learned how to feed the owlets and clean their box. She would hold the owlets, touching their down, and watching as their necks twisted 270 degrees.

“My uncle and aunt were saying because I have the courage to hold an owl, I’m involved in witchcraft,” she said. “But I started developing a love for owls, so I didn’t care what they said. It had a big impact on my life.”

He Was Nervous At First, But Now He Loves Owls

Owl catcher Mduduzi, who grew up in a village in KwaZulu-Natal province, remembers huddling in bed in a circular hut at night, hearing the hoots of owls. It meant there was something evil and dangerous lurking outside. He nestled down in fear.

“People would think that maybe someone sent that owl as a curse or maybe as a sign that someone would die,” he said.

When Mduduzi began rescuing owls five years ago, he said, he was “nervous, because I didn’t trust owls.” To begin with, he said, it was just a job that others were afraid to take, in an community where jobs are scarce.

Now after years of climbing up to roofs and reaching into small dark spaces to save owlets, he’s learned to love them. He is even training to become the country’s first black owl ringer, learning how to place a band on a bird’s leg so the owl can be traced and identified.

Owls Help Solve Rat Problem

He teaches people that owls are like any other birds, except that they get rid of an everyday evil: the large rats that crawl into people’s shacks and eat their food, clothing and shoes. There have been reports of rats gnawing off a baby’s fingers, or elderly and disabled people dying after being set upon by rats.

Explanations from the shy and soft-spoken Mduduzi seem to calm fears. After he tells people about owls and their behavior, he said, most people agree to accept breeding boxes nearby.

“People in townships have got a problem with owls, and they use rat poison. We go there and explain how the owls work, how the owls eat rats,” he said. “So now they know that owls are not dangerous to people.”

Quiz

- 1 Which paragraph in the section "Trying To Ease Old Superstitions" describes the owls?
- 2 Based on the article, which of the following is TRUE?
 - (A) Owls have many owlets, which grow rapidly.
 - (B) Owls are seen as bad luck, but they eat rats.
 - (C) Owls are bad luck, and many people are afraid of them.
 - (D) Owls live in attics, but not in other areas of people's homes.
- 3 Which of the following BEST describes the overall structure of the article?
 - (A) cause and effect
 - (B) chronological order
 - (C) problem and solution
 - (D) compare and contrast
- 4 Which of the following elements is NOT used in the article?
 - (A) direct quotes
 - (B) statistical data
 - (C) descriptive details
 - (D) personal examples

Answer Key

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Paragraph 6:

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