

He gives a hoot

Area man dedicates retirement to helping owls, other critters

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A great horned owl like this one can live nearly 30 years if they're lucky, weighs about three to five pounds and is an opportunistic hunter of small mammals with an 80 percent kill success rate. Photo by Virginia Strauss

His code name is Barn Owl Boy, or at least that's his Yahoo email. But on this particular day, Coarsegold resident Dennis Christiansen is holding a great horned owl, and has two more burly specimens in cardboard animal carriers at his feet.

The call came at the last minute on a Friday.

"I have three big owls that need to be released," Christiansen said. "Are you up for that?"

Oh, heck yes!

Dennis Christiansen is a retired elementary and middle school science teacher who participated for a long time in a wildlife program, ultimately caring for and monitoring the growth of more than 50 barn owls and great horned owls.

What turned out to be a lifelong interest first came to his attention when the daughter of a Fresno wildlife rehabber was a student in his class.

“The rehabber wanted to start a program where a class of sixth graders would rescue, raise and monitor the growth of baby barn owls,” Christiansen explained this week.



Dennis Christiansen prefers to release animals back into the wild when children are present because kids are the future caretakers of the world. Photo by Kellie Flanagan

“We picked barn owls because of their high tolerance to stress,” he laughs, referring to the classroom.

Christiansen had one educational barn owl in his classroom for 13 years, named Rosie.

“She sat loose on a log in the classroom up above and avoided middle schoolers like the plague,” he said.

The two were quite a team. They once even appeared together on the cover of Audubon Magazine, and received awards for sharing informative talks with more than 10,000 people over the years.

“Being involved in the ‘Barn Owls in the Classroom’ program gave me the love and appreciation of these marvelous creatures,” the National Guard veteran enthused.

“Having Rosie in my classroom for 13 years gave me even a greater appreciation of how amazing they are and of their importance to us. For example, one barn owl will take up to 1,000 rodents each year!”

The week after Christiansen retired from teaching, Rosie took her last flight. But her human friend kept going.



The 10-acre Critter Creek Wildlife Station in Squaw Valley is both a temporary and permanent home for wild animals in need of rehabilitation or lifetime care. Submitted photo

“We continued raising barn owl babies for over 20 years.”

Barn owl babies, Christiansen added, “have the face only a mother could love!”

Soon, he was helping raise other birds of prey and mammals. In his now-30 years of wildlife rehabilitation, Christiansen has cared for, nurtured and released hundreds of creatures back into the wild.

Currently, the single father of three grown sons is the pickup and temporary care person in the Coarsegold, Oakhurst, North Fork and Mariposa areas for Critter Creek Wildlife Station, located in Squaw Valley.

And that’s how he came to be releasing three owls in the Deadwood area as the sun set on Coarsegold recently. Each bird comes with a wingspan of about four and a half feet.

“What do we call birds that come out at nighttime?” Christiansen asked the gathered group of neighbors, including a handful of school age kids. He was holding a roughly three-pound owl just before its release into dusky evening sky.



Crittter Creek Wildlife Station volunteer Dennis Christiansen holds a great horned owl ready for release in Coarsegold. Photo by Dave Briley

“Nocturnal,” was the answer from a confident source.

“What do we call birds that come out in the daytime?”

“Diurnal,” an adult answered with less enthusiasm but equal accuracy.

Dennis said he prefers releasing wildlife back into the wild where there are children present because “they are our future wildlife caretakers.”

“I think he’s ready to go,” said one of the kids, echoing what others were sensing about the nocturnal bird anxious to be set free. “He’s ready to go.”

But Christiansen had a little more knowledge to lay out first. Education is an important part of the Critter Creek program, and his human audience was rapt and excited.

“This is a nocturnal bird – notice where its eyes are mounted. Are they on the side of the head like some other birds? No, they’re mounted on the front like this. We call that binocular vision.”

The owl perched tightly on Christiansen’s gloved arm rotated its head impressively, as if on cue.



The talons of a great horned owl can exert between 300 to 800 newtons of pressure responds whereas a human biting through a carrot exerts about 200 newtons of pressure. Photo by Kellie Flanagan

“The head goes not all the way around in a circle but, if he’s facing forward, he can go 270 degrees out of 360 which is three-fourths of the way.”

Humans, Christiansen continued, have seven vertebrae in that area while owls have nearly double that amount, allowing for the extra movement.

He held the owl up next to his head so their eyes were on the same plane. The bird was gifted with pupils that can dilate and contract independently of one another to control light for precision sight and hunting.

They have three eyelids: two that go up and down and one that goes across, sideways, called a nictating membrane.

But for every blessing it seems there’s a limitation.

“Look at my eyes and look at his eyes,” Christiansen purposefully darted his own eyeballs back and forth, side to side. “What can I do that he cannot do? We can see to left and right, because we have peripheral vision, but he doesn’t have any.”

The owl looked straight ahead.

“That’s why you see owls hit by cars so much: they don’t have peripheral vision so they don’t see a car coming from the side. They zero in on something in the road like road kill and they don’t see the car coming from over here.”

Injury resulting from contact with automobiles is just one of the reasons animals like these great horned owls come to Critter Creek Wildlife Station, a 10 acre facility in the foothills below Kings Canyon National Park in Squaw Valley.

Christiansen said Critter Creek is a unique and special place.

“There is such a feeling of commitment to the animals at Critter Creek, and a genuine concern for their health from the owners and volunteers, that it makes for a very satisfying experience to help out there.”

The longtime volunteer said Critter Creek accepts orphaned and injured animals from a huge area: Tulare, Kings, Fresno and parts of Madera, Kern and Mariposa counties. They respond to calls from the public and agencies including the California Department of

Fish and Game, Animal Control, SPCA, California Highway Patrol and the sheriff's offices.

Once a call comes in, Critter Creek will dispatch a nearby volunteer like Christiansen to pick up the animal and transport it to the vet or facility or elsewhere for care. Because our local vets in the foothills do not care for wild animals, Critter Creek coordinates with Dr. Ken Stocks and the staff at San Joaquin Veterinarian Hospital in Fresno.

A good amount of the nonprofit animal welfare organization's outreach time is spent on the phone educating and advising the public on wildlife and other environmental questions.

Critter Creek also offers educational presentations and open houses during which visitors are able to view the wildlife in their native habitat (see end of article for the free event). Organizers said the open house days are especially popular for kids because they can take their time, run around snapping pictures and learn about their favorite animals.

For Dennis Christiansen, that favorite is owls, all day long (or all night).

Besides contact with vehicles, owls and other birds can wind up at Critter Creek after an accidental run-in with tree trimmers, or because of nest damage from severe weather. Sometimes eggs get laid in farm equipment farmers need to use, and often young creatures venture from their nesting areas too early.

"We used to get many more barn owls than we get now but, because of the increase by farmers and ranchers in using nesting boxes and artificial housing, our numbers have dropped," Christiansen shared.

"Some years we'll have 10 red shouldered hawks and the next years we'll have 35. It varies every year. The same is true with all the animals."

Free barn owl nesting box plans are available from Critter Creek's website.

Recently, rescuers including Christiansen saved a handful of red shouldered hawks from a swimming hole where the raptors had gotten in a little too deep.

“We lost some but the others were just wet,” he said. “We had to dry them out and let them rest up because they exert themselves so much trying to get out. It’s almost impossible unless there’s a pool toy nearby they can use to help.”

Often, especially when the weather is foggy or rainy for a period of time, it’s hunger that takes a toll on wildlife. If birds of prey can’t see their prey through the precipitation, it’s bad news.

“They can’t go but two or three days without eating or they go down in a hurry.”

On good days, owls have about an 80 percent kill success rate. But a call came in recently about a screech owl just sitting without moving, in the back of a man’s truck.

“I picked it up with my hands,” Christiansen marveled. “When you can do that with a wild bird there’s something wrong with it, for sure.”

Five times larger than screech owls, the great horned owls Christiansen released this week in Coarsegold were rehabbed and ready to go.

They were all fairly young, probably born in spring this year, two females and one male. You can tell because the males are smaller than females. Still, he refers to the great horned ones as “the bad guys of the owl world” for their typically more aggressive nature.

Some of that aggressive nature is embedded in the owl’s strong talons.

A human being exerts about 200 newtons of pressure to bite through a carrot, Christiansen noted (a newton is a unit of force). The talon of even a young owl like the one he held exerts between 300 to 800 newtons of pressure, enabling it to grasp and hold creatures much bigger than one might otherwise imagine.

Unlike barn owls, which cruise in flight while searching for food, great horned owls will sit and wait for the perfect opportunity to snag a small mammal, from skunks and raccoons up to something like the size of a newborn fawn.

The great horned owl Christiansen was preparing to let go made a continuous trilling sound, what its temporary handler called a “churtle,” making it clear the bird was nervous.

“Normally, they are hooters,” he said of the animal one field guide called “the quintessential owl of storybooks.”

The large facial disc on a great horned owl serves as a “sound catcher” for the creature whose hearing is 10 times better than humans. Their ear tufts rise up to get bigger when the time comes to look more fierce.

In addition to being opportunistic in their hunting, great horned owls are known to inhabit abandoned nests rather than build their own, using the old abodes of a red tail hawk or an eagle nest no longer in use.

They’re not solitary; great horned owls will mate for life. If one of a pair dies, the other will likely mate again.

Despite their height of about two feet tall, they only weigh between three to five pounds. The longest known life span of a great horned owl is currently 29 years.

About 85 percent lose their lives within the first year, Christiansen said.

“It’s a tough life.”

Still, it was immensely clear the owls Christiansen prepared for release were more than ready to return to that life, tough or not.

Once he’d imparted sufficient knowledge to the small crowd gathered to ensure they’d be owl lovers for life, he let the birds go free, one at a time.

The sun had just set so it would be the beginning of a big night for the newly independent birds.

One flew south until it couldn’t be seen. Another dipped west. The third bird spread its massive wings and launched itself into the air before settling into a branch high atop a foothill pine tree, where it sat for a spell, observing its observers.

And Dennis Christiansen took off his gloves and prepared to return home to Yosemite Lakes Park where he’s lived for 20 years and “loved every minute of it.”

It's clear he loves what he does for creatures of the foothills who find themselves in need of a little helping human hand, for whatever reason.

"When you talk about nature, every bird and every animal that we have out here is just amazing," he said.

"They have these amazing things that they can do and yet, as good a hunter and as good as they are at survival, they still have a really tough life."

Critter Creek Wildlife Station is located at 36710 Sand Creek Road in Squaw Valley and will hold its next open house on Saturday, Dec. 11 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. (doors close at 1:30 p.m.). Free attendance (donations appreciated). Phone (559) 338-2415 or visit crittercreek.org for more information about the sanctuary.