

## **Lending wildlife a helping hand**

When Wendell Holton, the head of Holton Enterprises, approached his local Natural Resource Conservation Service office with concerns about the long-term management and sustainability of his farm he was staying true to his personal mission -- "I am only taking care of this land until it's the next generation's turn."

While defining some of his long-term goals with Justin Ross, soil conservationist in the Caldwell field office, the conversation turned to the larger natural resource picture. Holton realized during that meeting how important it is for nature to find a balance with agriculture. For example, when apex predators (like raptors) are lacking in a landscape, rodent and vermin populations tend to explode. That's not good situation for Holton's operation, so he asked Ross how he could give nature a little help finding that balance.

That initial conversation led to a series of conversations; and now, along with Holton's son Dustin – the farm manager, and grandson Harrison – the assistant manager – this family of farmers living near the Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area in Canyon County is embarking on a multi-species habitat support plan designed with the goal of creating a more robust agro-ecosystem.

### **“Wildlife Needs Our Protection”**

During one of their early discussions, Holton turned to Ross and said “Hey Justin, do you know anything about those little owls that live in the ground? They used to be here, but now I don't see them anymore.”

He was talking about the Western Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*). These charismatic birds are small, long legged owls that inhabit native rangeland in southern Idaho, often times moving into abandoned badger or coyote dens. Urbanization, the conversion of rangeland to cropland, and the removal of badgers and coyotes have reduced their prevalence across the state over the years.

Over the course of a couple of months, it was determined that Holton's farm contained prime habitat for the Western Burrowing Owl. Ross and Holton got to work on developing a conservation plan that not only addresses resource concerns related to this species, but also includes bats, barn owls, and pollinators.

Asked why he was willing to commit to this ambitious plan, Holton responded simply, “Wildlife needs our protection.”

### **Location, Location, Location**

In September 2017, Holton, Dustin and Harrison met with Ross and Jim Belthoff, a professor at Boise State University specializing in raptors, out at their farm to identify suitable sites for artificial burrows to benefit the ground-dwelling owls. NRCS will cost share on the burrows through its Environmental Quality Incentives Program. They were also joined by Amber Reeves, NRCS area resource conservationist from the Moscow office.

After getting a basic rundown from Belthoff on the sort of terrain burrowing owls favor, the group looked at a series of locations on the farm. Back-and-forth discussion between the NRCS employees, Belthoff and the Holtons covering what was attractive to owls and what was realistic in terms of maintaining the areas for maximum attractiveness ultimately narrowed down the possibilities to three sites. Ross marked the

burrow entrances with survey flags, while Beltoff gave recommendations on where the nest chambers should go in relation to the entrances.

Ross noted that having Belthoff help select appropriate sites was a fantastic experience.

“The Holtons and I were able to learn from someone who has been involved in actually installing successful artificial burrows at the Birds of Prey National Conservation Area. Jim (Beltoff) could provide not only the ‘where and how’ but also the ‘why it needs to be done that way’ information that is critical to ensuring our efforts are as successful as possible.”

### **Bats, Barn Owls and Butterflies**

Once sites for the artificial burrows were staked out, the conversation turned to the other species that the Holtons would be assisting, barn owls, bats and pollinators. Belthoff offered some insight into the potential location of barn owl boxes that would assist in reducing competition between the cavity-dwelling and the ground-dwelling owl species.

The group then rode out to an area of the farm designated as future pollinator habitat. The site isn’t under production and therefore easy to convert to a wildflower meadow for the benefit of native bees as well as monarch butterflies. It is also easy to protect the site from herbicides and insecticides. In addition, its location close to the river is a double bonus – water for this important wildlife and research shows that monarch use river corridors as migration routes. While there is currently no milkweed on in the area designated for pollinator habitat, if the wildflower seeding will produce 500-1,000 milkweed stems per acre.

“I’ve known about milkweed for a long time,” Holton said, “and I realize it’s important for those butterflies to have food.”

Holton also showed off one of the bat boxes they’ll be installing on the property to confirm that the design specifications were met and that it would be attractive to the bats. The four boxes will be hung in pairs and will provide roosting space for about 200 bats. This will provide supplemental habitat for the bats while Holton, in conjunction with NRCS, works to change his wood lot over to tree species that are more appropriate for bat roosting than the trees that are there now.

“I have always been an advocate of animals,” said Wendell, also noting that “if it wasn’t for animal conservation they would all be gone.”