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May 22 : Birds of Prey Used as Alternative to Pesticides

by Kelsey Rexroat

Farmers in [Israel](#) are using owls and kestrels as an alternative to harmful chemicals, the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) reports. The birds of prey hunt rodents that cause costly damage to crops. To encourage more birds to live around their fields, the farmers are installing nest boxes on their property.

Rodents and other small mammals are responsible for the destruction of about 35 percent of the world's crops. Many farmers use rodenticides, chemical sprays that kill mice and other rodents. However, birds can become sick or die when they eat animals that were exposed to these chemicals. The poisoned birds include many endangered species.

One organization coming to the rescue of poisoned birds is the World Owl Trust. This charity encourages farmers to use owls instead of chemicals to rid fields of pests. The nesting project allows farmers to work with the birds to control pests instead of spraying harmful chemicals. By living in harmony, owls and farmers can help each other.

Owls hunt at night, and kestrels hunt during the day. Using both types of birds means that the rodents are hunted 24 hours a day. By reducing crop damage and the use of costly pesticides, this natural approach saves farmers money.

The project is also good for the environment. More than two million tons of pesticides are used every year in agriculture. Pesticides are a valuable tool for protecting crops, but they have negative effects on the environment. Besides poisoning birds, the run-off from fields can get into streams and harm fish, other types of water life, and drinking water.

The nesting project began in 1983 and is slowly expanding. Currently, there are 1,000 nest boxes throughout Israel. The country of [Jordan](#) is beginning to participate in the project as well. At first, many farmers in Jordan were worried about having owls on their property because of long-held superstitions that the birds bring back luck. More farmers are using owls after seeing how well the method works.

The nest boxes encourage the birds of prey to stay in one area but do not completely prevent them from roaming. Birds that move into Jordan and other surrounding areas are still at risk of being poisoned by pesticides. Cooperation among the region's countries is important. If more areas agree not to use rodenticides, the birds will have greater sources of food and less risk of being poisoned, which will help the project's success.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT DISCUSSION

1. Agriculture is a major source of pollution worldwide. Pesticides, artificial fertilizers, and farmyard waste can contaminate the surrounding land and water. What are some methods that farmers can use to prevent agricultural pollution?
2. Kestrels and owls are both birds of prey, commonly called raptors. What features do raptors have that make them suited for hunting rodents and other small mammals?
3. Find Jordan and Israel on the [Asia Climate Map](#). (Hint: Open the PDF version of the map, then zoom in to the left-hand edge.) What is the climate like in this region? What kinds of crops do you think these countries might grow? Use the Internet or other resources to find out.

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