



A little piece of the Mediterranean...

By Simon Dudhill Chairman East Midlands Group

Birdfair, held annually at Rutland Water, always gives us a great opportunity to promote Adopt a Box. It also gives us the opportunity to meet and talk with like-minded conservationists from all over the world and this year we had a chance meeting with Pepe Antolín, from Extremadura in Spain. Pepe is involved with designing and producing nest boxes with a life expectancy of 100 years and beyond.

Pepe is involved with DEMA, an NGO conservation group in Extremadura which focuses its work on the conservation of Lesser Kestrel, a species that is characteristic to Spain, and highly endangered. As part of this work, Pepe developed a nesting box for the kestrels using locally available materials. Having developed, tested and improved it, he realised that nestboxes for other species could also be produced using the same methods.

After several interesting chats with Pepe, we agreed to take a Barn Owl box he kindly offered to us so that we could try the design here in this country.

It certainly has a touch of the Mediterranean to it!

In order to produce a box that is both lightweight and durable, Pepe uses the local cork. Sheets of expanded cork are coated with a mineral cement, giving the box not only its durability and lightness, but also very good thermal and acoustic insulation. The lime mortar will continue to harden over time, forming an eventual solid block, which prevents parasites from lodging. The design of the box encourages efficient air circulation and the outer platforms give additional options for newly fledging birds to climb onto when venturing out of the box.

A significant amount of research has gone into producing a more efficient nest box, and early reports suggest that it is proving very successful in Spain. But how will it cope with a traditional English climate, and will the birds go from the usual wooden nesting boxes into this new design?

A good opportunity for us to test it at a proven nesting site for Barn Owls.



Find out more about the work of Pepe and DEMA (Defensa y Estudio del Medio Ambiente) at:
<http://demaprimilla.org>



... in the East Midlands.

The construction means we have to give greater thought to the structure on which it is placed.

The cork gives the structure its low weight, and the lime mortar its durability, but as already mentioned, the box eventually forms a solid block which cannot be fixed directly through and won't support its own weight. Drilling a hole through the back and fixing it to a pole or brick wall is simply not an option. A purpose made platform would need to be constructed on the proposed structure but would this greatly reduce the options we have when it comes to erecting the box in a tree, where many of our boxes are already located?

When erecting nest boxes made from traditional materials like wood, we are able to part assemble the box, fix that main structure in the required location, then add other sections like the front and ledge afterwards. This method gives much more flexibility and manoeuvrability when negotiating around awkward branches or up against uneven tree trunks. As a solid block in this new design we may lose much of that

when trying to place it within the network of limbs in an old oak!

I do fear that this box will not stand up to being dropped even once, unlike a wooden box. All these factors will need to be taken into account when deciding on a suitable site to place the box.

It is possible that greater thought will need to be given with regards to attracting birds to use the and discovering which type of box they prefer. However, we know from having monitored Barn Owls for a long time that they are very inquisitive birds and can adapt to change very well. The relocation of boxes for development, for example, will see them move to their new home almost immediately.

Initially, with this completely new design of box, we will be looking to erect it in the vicinity of other boxes that have been regularly used successfully for a number of years by an experienced breeding pair. If this proves to be successful, the next stage of the trial will be to erect the box in a different location that has not had birds in that

area for a while and see if it attracts them back.

Whichever location we choose we can never guarantee the weather and how climate conditions are going to affect food sources and breeding conditions.

Once erected, the box will be monitored to see if there has been any activity. As with all the boxes we erect, we can never be totally sure of what species we will attract. In many cases it turns out not to be the one intended. In the next issue we hope to show you the box in-situ and any problems we may have encountered along the way. I was about to say that although we have a very Mediterranean looking box we can't guarantee the Mediterranean weather, but after the summer we have just had then maybe we can!



Lesser Kestrel (above) by Roger Tidman/NPL

Barn Owl nest box (left) from DEMA website.

What started as a tool in a conservation project for Lesser Kestrels in central Spain is now being trialled in the East Midlands for Barn Owls. Like our familiar Kestrels, Lesser Kestrels readily take to nest boxes.

Follow the progress - and success or failure - of this novel box over the coming editions of *Adopt a Box News*.