

## Illinois Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) Recovery Plan – Year 3 (2013) Review of Accomplishments



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### **Summary**

In 2009, an Illinois Barn Owl Recovery Team made up of representatives from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board (ESPB), The Nature Conservancy in Illinois, and Illinois Natural History Survey (INHS) was established to oversee development and implementation of the *Illinois Barn Owl (Tyto alba) Recovery Plan (2010)*. Many parts of plan development and implementation have been supported as functions of the IDNR and ESPB, but essential funding for development of the plan and initial implementation was supported by United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) State Wildlife Grant (SWG) project (T-35-P-1) and additional implementation and research is being supported by a Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife

Restoration Act funded project. The recovery plan calls for a first year and then biennial reviews of accomplishments where the recovery team will produce and post to the ESPB's webpage progress reports relative to the Prioritized Recovery Strategies identified in the recovery plan. The recovery team holds an annual plan-of-work meeting each January to review accomplishments and the plan and to plan activities for the next year.

Implementation efforts since 2010 have included evaluation and identification of suitable and priority habitat areas, protection of at least 200 acres of grassland habitat, enhancement/restoration of over 16,500 acres of grassland habitat, placement of 226 new nest boxes, monitoring of 469 nest boxes, and reporting of 106 new nesting occurrences. Outreach about the project has included posting to the ESPB's webpage a copy of the recovery plan and an informational brochure entitled "Help Bring Back the Barn Owl"; publishing articles in the IDNR's *OutdoorIllinois* magazine, the Meadowlark, and Illinois Audubon; and, recovery team members presenting talks at meetings of scientific organizations and interest groups and making contact with individual landowners and conservation organizations. These efforts have resulted in support from and coordination of activities with multiple partners mentioned in the Acknowledgments section and the placement of 85 nest boxes on private properties where suitable habitat exists and landowners are willing to manage it in a manner that is compatible for the barn owl.

The barn owl has been listed as Illinois-endangered since 1977. The recovery plan recommends that the ESPB evaluate the status of the barn owl and consider a change in status from *Endangered* to *Threatened* when 40 active nest sites distributed among at least 15 counties are reported within a 5-year period. A change in status from *Threatened* to recovered should be considered when 80 active nest sites distributed among at least 30 counties are reported in a 5-year period, and other threats to the population are low. The ESPB reviews the *Illinois List of Endangered and Threatened Species* at least every five years and the next scheduled review will end in 2014. For the 5-year period ending in 2011, the recovery team had documented 46 unique active nests in at least 24 counties (one box is on a county line) and made recommendation to the ESPB to evaluate the status of the barn owl and consider a change in status from Endangered to Threatened.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Introduction**

This current report reviews the first three years of accomplishments toward the Prioritized Recovery Strategies, Outputs, and Outcomes and the Status Review Triggers established in the *Illinois Barn Owl (Tyto alba) Recovery Plan (2010)*. Most reporting is for the first three years of recovery plan implementation, but some reporting includes information from years prior to completion of the plan. The information presented here is derived from Illinois Natural Heritage (Biotics 4) Database records as of

12/17/2013, reports received from IDNR staff and volunteer coordinators and may not include all data for the reporting period; information submitted to the recovery team after the publication of this report will be incorporated into subsequent biennial reports of accomplishments. For more detailed information about species biology and the process and prescriptions behind items reviewed in this document, please consult the recovery plan itself. The recovery plan, implementation performance reports, and a brochure entitled “Help Bring Back the Barn Owl” can be found on the Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board’s webpage at <http://www.dnr.state.il.us/ESPB/recovery.html> .

### **Prioritized Recovery Strategies**

1. Deploy and monitor nest boxes within plausible nesting areas.
2. Do not interfere with young barn owls during fledging.
3. Expand dedicated grassland conservation areas.
4. Encourage land use practices that support populations of voles (*Microtus* spp.) and other small mammals.
5. Build public awareness of barn owls & support for barn owl conservation.
6. Research of barn owl ecology & behavior.

### **Status Review Triggers**

1. That the ESPB evaluate the status of the barn owl and consider a change in status from *Endangered* to *Threatened* when 40 active nest sites distributed among at least 15 counties are reported within a 5-year period.
2. That the ESPB evaluate the status of the barn owl and consider a change in status from *Threatened* to recovered when 80 active nest sites distributed among at least 30 counties are reported in a 5-year period, and other threats to the population are low.

**Recovery Strategy 1:** Deploy and monitor nest boxes within plausible nesting areas. The near-term objective of this strategy is to increase the number of known barn owl nests in Illinois. Longer-term, monitoring nest boxes will serve as a proxy for monitoring barn owl population changes.



Figure 1. IDNR staff placing and monitoring pole-mounted barn owl nest boxes.

2011 - Appendix II of the recovery plan provides guidance for evaluating habitats and sites (page 67; *Guidance and suggested scoring of various factors affecting the feasibility and probability of success of barn owl conservation. Conservation actions in areas scoring  $\geq 7$  are most likely to benefit barn owls.*) The barn owl recovery team and partners, IDNR staff, and volunteers, used this guidance in placing 62 boxes in 22 counties, adding 9 new counties. In addition, the Illinois Audubon Society donated another 6 and IDNR purchased (via the W76D program) another 10 free-standing boxes during 2011. These free-standing models were deployed in 2012.

2012 – IDNR staff, INHS staff working on the Pittman-Robertson funded project, and other partners placed 72 boxes in 28 counties, adding 12 new counties. In addition, the Illinois Department of Transportation contributed supplies for mounting boxes for several years of field work.

2013 – IDNR staff, INHS staff working on the Pittman-Robertson funded project, and other partners placed 53 boxes in 19 counties, adding 5 new counties. In addition, the Decatur Audubon Society donated another 6 free-standing boxes during 2013. These free-standing models will be deployed in 2014.

	Prior to 2009	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Boxes placed	112	1	39	62	72	53
# of Counties	23	1	13	22	28	19
# of New Counties	23	0	5	9	12	5
<b>Running Total Boxes</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>286</b>	<b>339</b>
<b>Running Total Counties</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>54</b>

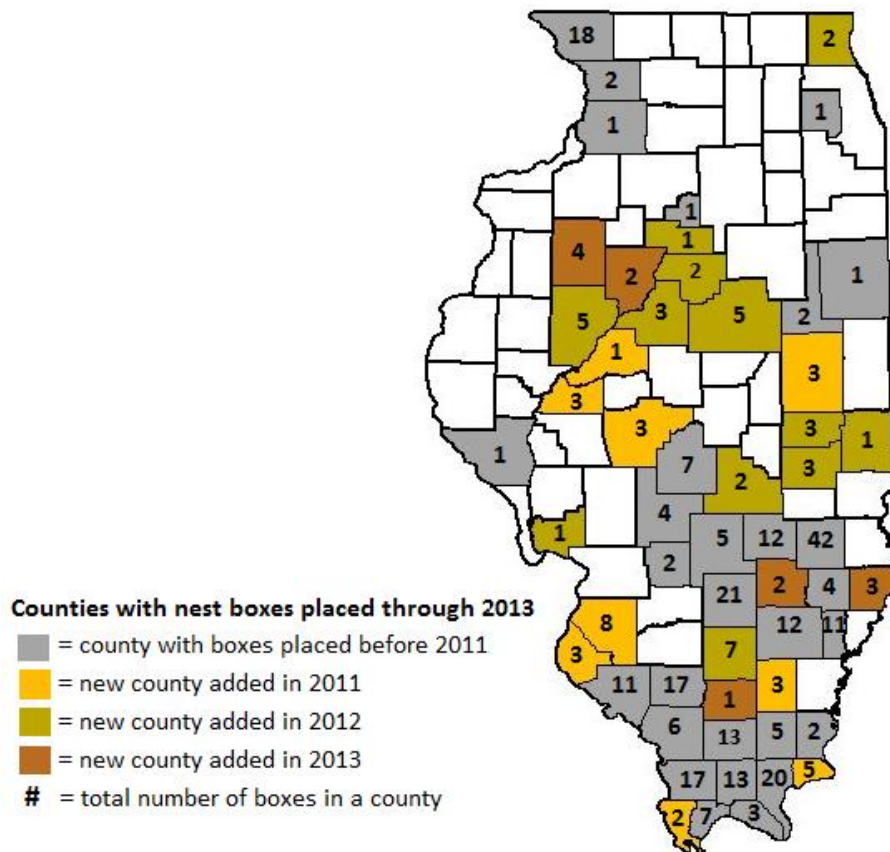


Figure 2. Counties with Barn owl nest box placements prior to 2011, for each year from 2011-2013, and total number of boxes in each county. (Natural Heritage (Biotics 4) Database, 2013).

b. Revisit an additional 25 nest boxes (deployed prior to 2009) to find evidence of use (pellets, feathers), determine nest box condition, and replace if damaged/destroyed as appropriate, based on local conditions (Years 1-5).

Performance Reporting

Prior to 2009 – IDNR and conservation partners placed 112 boxes in 23 counties. There is no record of systematic box monitoring prior to 2009.

2009 – The barn owl recovery team and partners monitored 14 existing boxes.

2010 – The barn owl recovery team and partners monitored 8 boxes deployed prior to 2009.

2011 – The barn owl recovery team, IDNR staff, and other partners, monitored 32 boxes deployed prior to 2009.

2012 – IDNR staff, INHS staff working on the Pittman-Robertson funded project, and other partners, monitored 28 boxes deployed prior to 2009.

2013 - IDNR staff, INHS staff working on the Pittman-Robertson funded project, and other partners, monitored 42 boxes deployed prior to 2009.

c. Monitor nest boxes considered in (a) and (b) above annually (50 boxes in Year 2 and an additional 50 boxes/year until 250 boxes are monitored annually in Year 6 and after).

Performance Reporting

Prior to 2009 – There is no record of systematic box monitoring prior to 2009.

2009 – The barn owl recovery team and partners monitored 14 total boxes.

2010 – The barn owl recovery team and partners monitored 43 total boxes.

2011 – The barn owl recovery team, IDNR staff, and other partners, monitored 81 total boxes.

2012 – IDNR staff, INHS staff working on the Pittman-Robertson funded project, and other partners, monitored 102 total boxes.

2013 - IDNR staff, INHS staff working on the Pittman-Robertson funded project, and other partners, monitored 243 total boxes.

	<b>Prior to 2009</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
# of boxes deployed prior to 2009 monitored	N/A	14	8	32	28	42
# of boxes deployed during or after 2009 monitored	N/A	0	35	49	74	201
<b>Total number of boxes monitored</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>243</b>

d. Report evidence of barn owl nesting in nest boxes and other situations to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Biotics 4 database (Annual).

Performance Reporting

Prior to 2009 – For the period of 1990-2009, there were 38 barn owl nesting records from 31 counties.

2009 – Initial monitoring efforts by the recovery team and partners documented 8 nesting records in 8 counties.

2010 – The barn owl recovery team and partners documented 21 nesting records in 15 counties.

2011 – The barn owl recovery team, IDNR staff, and other partners, documented 21 nesting records in 15 counties (one nest location is on a county line).

2012 – The barn owl recovery team, INHS staff, IDNR staff, and other partners, documented 25 nesting records in 16 counties (one nest location is on a county line).

2013 – The barn owl recovery team, INHS staff, IDNR staff, and other partners, documented 39 nesting records in 16 counties.

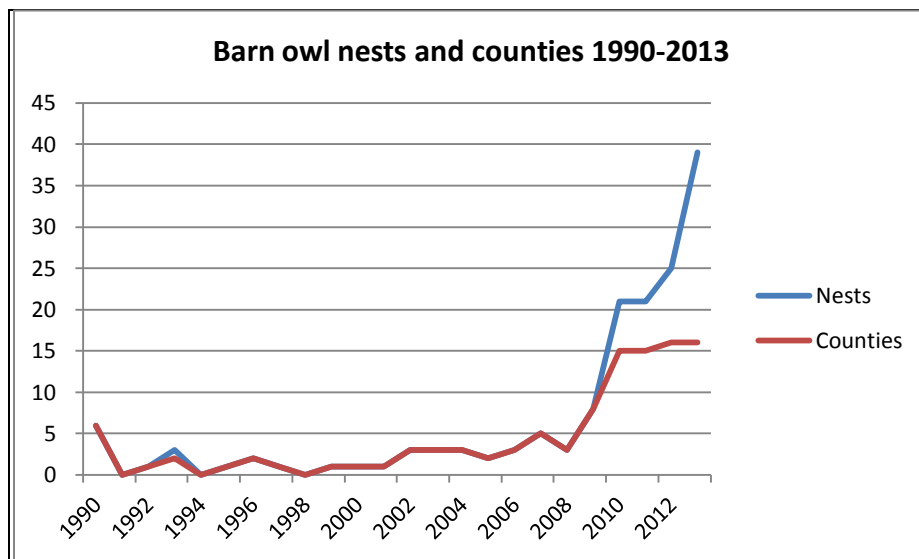


Figure 3. Number of Barn owl nests and counties with nests, from 1990-2013 (Natural Heritage (Biotics 4) Database, 2013).

*Outcomes:*

Number of occupied barn owl nest boxes (Annual). 2010 (6); 2011 (16); 2012 (17); 2013 (26)

Number of counties with nesting barn owls (Annual). 2010 (15); 2011 (15); 2012 (16); 2013 (16)

Number of Element Occurrence Reports of nesting barn owls (Annual). 2010 (21); 2011(21); 2012 (25); 2013 (39)

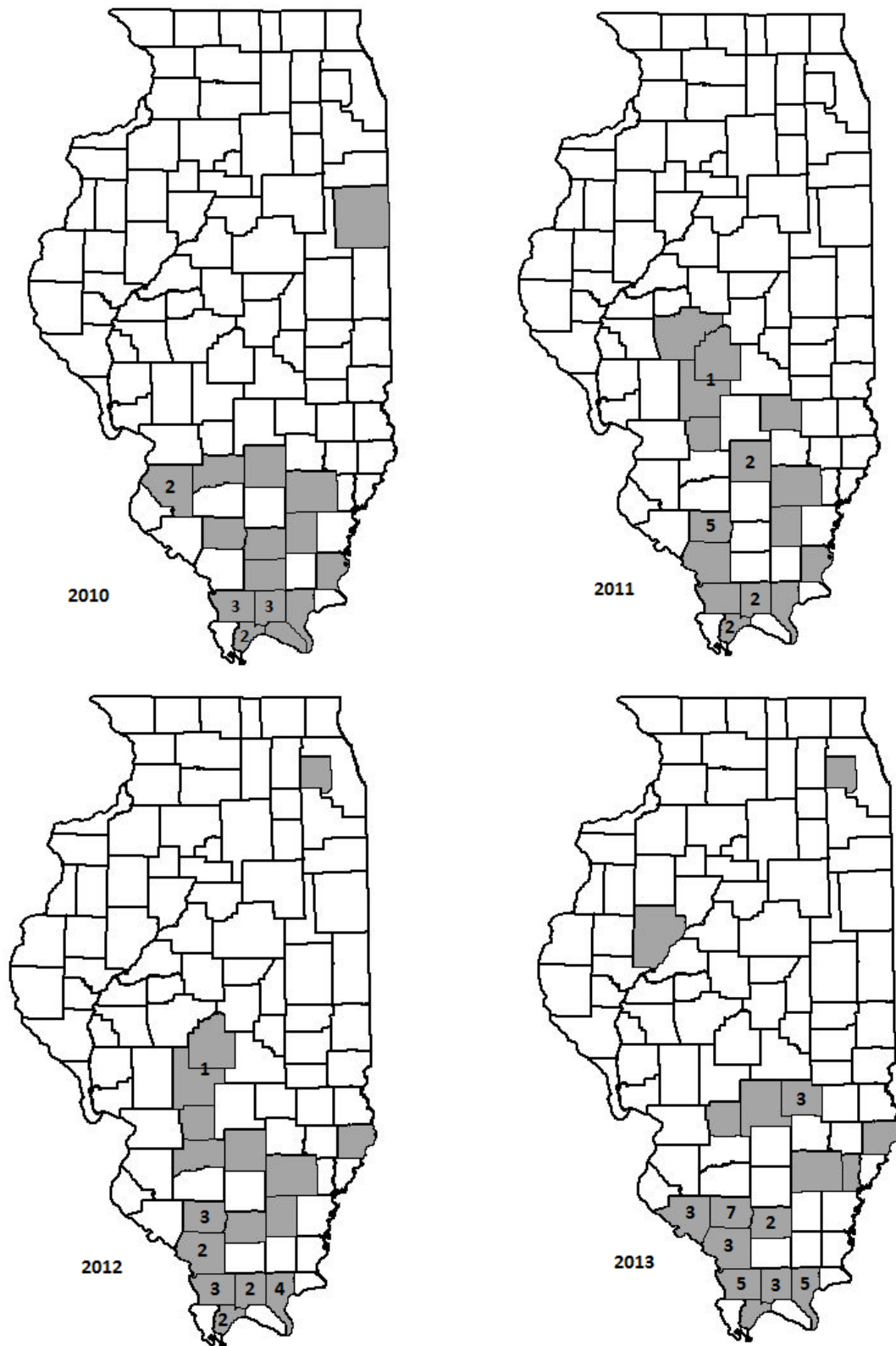


Figure 4. Counties with Barn owl nesting occurrences for each year from 2010-2013. Shaded counties had at least one nesting occurrence: Numbers indicate how many nesting occurrences in each county for the year; the number 1 is shown straddling two counties in 2011 and 2012 to indicate a single nesting occurrence on the county-line between the two counties; otherwise, shaded counties without numbers had a single nesting occurrence (Natural Heritage (Biotics 4) Database, 2013).

**Recovery Strategy 2:** Do not interfere with young barn owls during fledging.

*Output:*

a. Communicate to field biologists in the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, county forest preserve districts, other agencies or organizations, and to wildlife rehabilitators on the appropriate handling of situations when nestling or fledgling barn owls are discovered (Year 1). Recommend that not interfering with nesting or fledging is the best option, that barn owls only be captured when they are in immediate danger and moved to the nearest safe location, and that only injured barn owls are taken to wildlife rehabilitators. Biologists should give the same advice to persons discovering nestling or fledgling barn owls. Any barn owl brought to a wildlife rehabilitator should be reported to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. Any injured barn owl that is rehabilitated should be released near the site where it was initially found.

Performance Reporting

In 2011, the recovery team published to the Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board's webpage a brochure entitled "Help Bring Back the Barn Owl" that advises what to do and who to contact if landowners have questions about the recovery plan and activities, reporting barn owl occurrences, placing barn owl boxes, and reporting injured barn owls.

*Outcome:*

Number of uninjured juvenile owls brought to wildlife rehabilitators and reported to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (Annual). 2011 (3); 2012 (no information); 2013 (no information).

**Recovery Strategy 3:** Expand dedicated grassland conservation areas.

*Outputs:*

a. Protect additional areas (and restore to grassland habitat if necessary) at dedicated grassland conservation areas, as opportunities become available, averaging 200 acres protected per year (Years 1-5). Protection may include acquisition, permanent easement, or dedication as a Nature Preserve or Land & Water Reserve.

Performance Reporting

2011 - the Illinois Audubon Society acquired the 200-acre Maxine Loy Estate, which provides special protection to additional grassland habitat associated with the existing 12-Mile Prairie Natural Area Inventory Site. Three barn owl nest boxes were placed in existing barns on this property in 2011. The IDNR also approved a FY2012 \$7,000 Wildlife Preservation Fund grant for habitat restoration of the property.

2012 – No information available.

2013 – No information available.

b. Install additional barn owl nest boxes at grassland conservation areas (Annual).

Performance Reporting

2010 - 26 barn owl nest boxes were placed at IDNR and partner grassland conservation areas.

2011 - 11 barn owl nest boxes were placed at IDNR and partner grassland conservation areas.

2012 – 8 barn owl nest boxes were placed at IDNR and partner grassland conservation areas.

2013 – 1 barn owl nest box was placed at IDNR and partner grassland conservation areas.



c. Monitor barn owl nest boxes at grassland conservation areas (Annual).

Performance Reporting

2010 - 4 barn owl nest boxes were monitored at IDNR and partner grassland conservation areas.

2011, 40 barn owl nest boxes were monitored at IDNR and partner grassland conservation areas.

2012 – 20 barn owl nest boxes were monitored at IDNR and partner grassland conservation areas.

2013 – 30 barn owl nest boxes were monitored at IDNR and partner grassland conservation areas.

d. Report evidence of barn owl nesting in nest boxes at grassland conservation areas to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Biotics 4 database (Annual).

Performance Reporting

Barn owl recovery team members and IDNR staff assisting with the project, as well as cooperating partner and volunteer groups, are reporting to the IDNR Biotics 4 database evidence of barn owl nesting from all locations, including at IDNR and partner grassland conservation areas.

*Outcome:*

Number of Element Occurrence Reports of nesting barn owls at grassland conservation areas (Annual). 2011 (10); 2012 (5); 2013 (6)

**Recovery Strategy 4:** Encourage land use practices that support populations of voles (*Microtus spp.*) and other small mammals.

*Outputs:*

a. Establish or enhance (through prescribed fire, re-seeding, invasive species control, improved grazing practices, or mechanical disturbance) 2,000 acres of grassland on private lands each year (Years 1-5). Acreages established to grasslands through Farm Bill programs (e.g., Conservation Reserve Program) may greatly exceed this objective, but should be focused in areas most likely to benefit barn owls (i.e., locations scoring >7 on factors described in Appendix II).

Performance Reporting

Through 2011 - IDNR administered contracts for grassland habitat enhancement work on private lands totaling approximately 8,800 acres in the USDA Conservation Stewardship Program (from 2008 – 2010) and 670 acres in the USDA Landowner Incentive Program (from 2007 – 2010).

Through 2010, the IDNR also assisted with enrolling approximately 5,880 acres across 21 counties of the Grand Prairie Project Area and approximately 640 acres across 7 counties of the Southern Till Plain Project Area in the USDA State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement program. This program establishes new grassland and enhances existing grassland habitat.

2012 – IDNR wrote plans for 4,071 acres of grassland establishment and enhancement on private lands.

2013 - IDNR wrote plans for 5,127 acres of grassland establishment and enhancement on private lands during the first three quarters of the year.

b. Enhance (through prescribed fire, re-seeding, invasive species control, improved grazing practices, or mechanical disturbance) 1,000 acres of grassland on public lands each year (Years 1-5). Habitat enhancement in locations scoring >7 on factors described in Appendix II are most likely to benefit barn owls.

Performance Reporting

2011 – IDNR conducted 1,100 acres of grassland prescribed burns on IDNR properties in Region 5.

2012 – No information available

2013 – IDNR conducted over 2,000 acres of grassland prescribed burns on IDNR properties in Regions 4 and 5. IDNR conducted invasive species control and other grassland habitat management activities on over 4,300 acres on IDNR properties in Regions 4 and 5.

*Outcomes:*

Number of occupied barn owl nest boxes (Annual). 2010 (6); 2011 (16); 2012 (17); 2013 (26)

Number of counties with nesting barn owls (Annual). 2010 (15); 2011 (15); (16); 2013 (16)

Number of Element Occurrence Reports of nesting barn owls (Annual). 2010 (21); 2011(21); 2012 (25); 2013 (39)

**Recovery Strategy 5: Build Public Awareness of Barn Owls & Support for Barn Owl Conservation.**

*Outputs:*

a. Develop an informational brochure on barn owls and barn owl conservation in Illinois for distribution to the public (Year 1). A print version could be available for venues such as the Illinois State Fair and the U. S. Department of Agriculture’s county Service Centers. Post an electronic version on the Illinois Department of Natural Resources’ and Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board’s websites.

Performance Reporting

2011 – The recovery team published to the Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board’s webpage a brochure entitled “Help Bring Back the Barn Owl” that advises what to do and who to contact if landowners have questions about the recovery plan and activities, reporting barn owl occurrences, placing barn owl boxes, and reporting injured barn owls. There is currently a moratorium on printing for State of Illinois agencies, so no print versions of any items are being produced by the team. Additionally, Dr. Jeff Walk, the primary author of the recovery plan, and gave a presentation about the recovery plan and efforts to the Illinois Chapter of the Wildlife Society, Terry Esker gave a presentation to the Illinois Audubon Society, Mike Blackowicz (IDNR) gave four presentations at the Dixon Springs Sustainable Living Expo, and Dr. T.J. Benson gave a presentation to the Springfield Audubon Society.

2012 – No activities.

2013 – Terry Esker gave a presentation to the Decatur Audubon Society.

b. Publish biennial reports on barn owl recovery progress on the Illinois Department of Natural Resources’ and Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board’s websites (Years 1, 3, 5).

Performance Reporting

2011 – The recovery team developed its first-year report in 2011 and it was published to the ESPB webpage in early 2012.

2012 – Not applicable.

2013 – The recovery team developed a draft of the “Illinois Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) Recovery Plan – Year 3 (2013) Review of Accomplishments” that will be published to the ESPB webpage sometime after the beginning of calendar year 2014.

c. Publish an article on barn owls and barn owl conservation in Illinois through a popular outlet, such as *OutdoorIllinois* (Year 2).

Performance Reporting

2011 – The barn owl recovery team published the following articles in 2011:

Walk, J. W., A. Mankowski, T. L. Esker, M. Cole, and M. G. Alessi. 2011. Status of the Barn Owl in Illinois. *Meadowlark: A Journal of Illinois Birds* 20:2-5.

Walk, J. W., A. Mankowski, T. L. Esker, M. Cole, and M. G. Alessi. 2011. A Brighter Future for a Bird of the Night. *OutdoorIllinois*. June 2011.

2012 – Recovery team member Jeff Walk was the lead author on an article “On the Road to Recovery” published in *Illinois Audubon Magazine* (Winter 2011-2012).

2013 – No activities.

*Outcomes:*

Number of reports of barn owls from citizens to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (Annual). 2010 (5); 2011 (3); 2012 (3); 2013 (6).

Number of nest boxes installed on private lands at the landowner’s request (Annual). 2010 (12); 2011 (42); 2012 (20); 2013 (11)

Number of nest boxes monitored by volunteer cooperators (Annual). 2010 (0); 2011 (10); 2012 (11); 2013 (10)

Number of Element Occurrence Reports of nesting barn owls on private lands (Annual). 2011 (9); 2012 (16); 2013 (22)

**Recovery Strategy 6: Research of Barn Owl Ecology & Behavior.**

*Outputs:*

a. Evaluate the effectiveness of playback recordings to attract barn owls to unoccupied nest boxes (Year 1-3). Attempt at >1 site per year.

Performance Reporting

2011 - an Illinois Audubon Society contract employee working at IDNR’s Prairie Ridge State Natural Area, conducted some playback recording surveys with no success at several barns in Edwards County, including one barn where an owl had been observed. A more robust effort is planned in upcoming years.

2012 – No activities.

2013 – INHS staff working on the Pittman-Robertson funded project began limited research using playback recording surveys at several locations in Region 5 and experienced some success with responses from barn owls.

b. Solicit volunteers from at least 10 MOON (<http://www.inhs.uiuc.edu/research/MOON/>) routes in the southern ½ of Illinois (where barn owls are most likely to be encountered) to add barn owl vocalizations to the protocol (Years 1-5). If detections exceed >1 barn owl/10 routes/year, expand the protocol to include barn owls on other routes.

### Performance Reporting

2010 - 1 detection in 11 routes that included playbacks for barn owls.

2011 – No detections in 6 routes that included playbacks for barn owl.

2012 – No barn owls were detected in 24 routes with playbacks played on some routes.

2013 - No barn owls were detected in 31 routes with playbacks played on some routes.

### *Outcomes:*

Number of occupied barn owl nest boxes (Annual). 2010 (6); 2011 (16); 2012 (17); 2013 (26)

Number of Element Occurrence Reports of nesting barn owls (Annual). 2010 (21); 2011(21); 2012 (25); 2013 (39)

Number of barn owls detected on Monitoring of Owls and Nightjars, MOON, routes in Illinois (Annual). 2010 (1 in 11 routes); 2011 (0 in 6 routes); 2012 (0 in 24 routes); 2013 (0 in 31 routes)

## **Status Review Triggers**

Objectives & Criteria. We propose that measures of population size and distribution, as documented in the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Biotics 4 database, be used to trigger a detailed review of the barn owl's status by the Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board. Achieving the levels of population size and distribution proposed in this plan shall not prompt an 'automatic' change in the status of the barn owl in Illinois. Other factors, including known threats, nest productivity, and extent and condition of protected habitat, should be considered with population size and distribution data to judge whether a change in status is warranted.

*Change from Endangered to Threatened in Illinois* – The ESPB shall thoroughly evaluate the status of the barn owl and consider a change in status from *Endangered* to *Threatened* when, over the past 5 years, the Biotics 4 database has Element Occurrence Records of 40 active nest sites distributed among at least 15 counties. A nest site active in >1 year of the 5-year interval is considered a single record. The ESPB should judge the threats to the population, to nesting sites, and to barn owl habitat are low to moderate, or manageable with existing conservation resources. The reverse of these conditions could be used to consider a change from *Threatened* to *Endangered* should the population's condition degrade at some future point following an improvement in status.

*Removal from Threatened in Illinois (Recovered)* - The ESPB shall thoroughly evaluate the status of the barn owl and consider a change in status from *Threatened* to recovered when, over the past 5 years, the Biotics 4 database has Element Occurrence Records of 80 active nest sites distributed among at least 30 counties. A nest site active in >1 year of the 5 year interval is considered a single record. The ESPB should judge that the threats to the population, nesting sites, and barn owl habitat are low. The population should be likely to persist at similar levels with sustainable conservation actions (e.g., nest box maintenance and monitoring program, with responsibility for program continuation assigned to one or more entities). The reverse of these conditions could be used to consider a change to *Threatened* should the population's condition degrade at some future point following recovery.

### Performance Reporting

2011 - After one full year of recovery plan implementation combined with recovery activities from previous years, there was a total of 46 unique nest records from at least 24 counties (one nest is on a county line) for the five-year interval ending in 2011 (IDNR Biotics 4 Database, March 2012). The recovery team made a recommendation to the ESPB to evaluate the status of the barn owl and consider a change in status from Endangered to Threatened during its review and revision of the Illinois List of Endangered and Threatened Species that should conclude in 2014.

2012 – After two years of recovery plan implementation combined with recovery activities from previous years, there was a total of 50 unique nest records from at least 27 counties (one nest is on a county line) for the five-year interval ending in 2012 (IDNR Biotics 4 Database, December 2013).

2013 - After three years of recovery plan implementation combined with recovery activities from previous years, there was a total of 70 unique nest records from at least 28 counties (one nest is on a county line) for the five-year interval ending in 2013 (IDNR Biotics 4 Database, December 2013).

<b>5-Year Interval</b>	<b># Nest Records</b>	<b># Counties With Nest Records</b>
2007-2011	46	24
2008-2012	50	27
2009-2013	70	28