



# THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

## Encouraging Natural Rodent Control

**Did you know that one barn owl can eat 1,000 rodents in a year? Or 155 gophers a year?**

Many local birds of prey (including owls, hawks, kestrels, and eagles) love to eat mice, rats, and gophers. Thus they're our natural allies in managing these pests without toxics

Yes, these soaring beauties that lift our eyes overhead — and offer magical soft hoots in the night — are also part of nature's systems at work. And they offer us their services for free!

For instance, one study found that, after raptor nesting boxes were placed in farm areas, applications for highly-toxic rodenticides dropped 50 to 90%. (<https://bit.ly/2Gvn5Z9>)

### What You Can Do

So, how can you support raptors in their essential role?

**1) Don't use rat poisons, at home or work. Also don't allow your pest control service to use them.** When rats are poisoned, so are the raptors who eat them. This harms them

— and your rodent control goals, by taking those natural predators out of the rodent control game. Also, even small amounts of



rat poison can be highly toxic to curious children, pets, and wildlife. (See over.) We shared the story of a reader whose cat was poisoned in *TNS IX/6* ([www.healthyworld.org/GRAPHICS/STEP/stepvol9no6.pdf](http://www.healthyworld.org/GRAPHICS/STEP/stepvol9no6.pdf)). And poisoned rats can die behind walls, causing an unreachable smell.

**2) Avoid using other pesticides outside.** Many studies have shown that common insecticides and herbicides can kill and weaken birds and other wildlife — and travel far beyond their original property lines. (See <https://bit.ly/2TRXb4J>.) Plus the relatively new neonicotinoid pesticides are toxic to birds at shockingly low levels. According to The American Bird Conservancy, "A single corn kernel coated with a neonicotinoid can kill a songbird." (<https://bit.ly/2S842p1>) The STEP Index can help you find less-toxic alternatives to your current products.

**3) Consider encouraging owls on your land.** This can be an easy and low-cost way to help reduce a pest population. See the top right sidebar for more. (Note: You might not want to do this if you have outdoor pets or chickens. Or at least keep them protected or inside after twilight.)

**4) Use other smarter rodent controls.** (See bottom right sidebar.)

**BONUS TIP: Are owls already visiting your land?** We often don't know, because of their quiet nocturnal ways and skillful camouflage. But their calls can give them away. Compare the sounds you hear to the ones listed here: <https://bit.ly/2BGiPSr>. (I'm delighted to discover that I'm being visited by a Great Horned Owl!)

## How to Welcome Owl Visitors

■ **Respect personal space.** Do not disturb owls or their nests.

■ **Protect darkness.** Turn off outdoor lights overnight, or put them on timers or motion sensors. Owls need darkness for their night hunting.

■ **Retain perches.** Leave some large horizontal branches on trees. Owls like to perch and roost in large mature shaded and secluded trees.

■ **Offer shelter.** Keep trees with cavities and old nests for owls to nest in. Or explore building or buying nesting boxes. Learn what boxes work best for your desired owls, and how to set yours' up effectively.

■ **Provide a summer bath.** Owls don't generally need birdbaths. But in summer heat they can enjoy a deeper birdbath for drinking or washing, ideally in a more secluded spot.

■ **Take down soccer and other nets at night.** Owls can fly into them and get tangled or caught.

Learn fun facts about owls at [www.idahoptv.org/sciencetrek/topics/owls/facts.cfm](http://www.idahoptv.org/sciencetrek/topics/owls/facts.cfm). For information on local birds, see <https://bit.ly/2DQ84gV>.

## Other Rodent Control Steps

Rats and mice can cause damage to and inside buildings. Here are some key less-toxic ways to protect your home:

■ **Find and block rodent entry points.** An expert can help; look for one committed to non-toxic ways.

■ **Store food in secure containers** (especially grains).

■ **Trap rodents that get inside.** With mice, you can use live traps to catch and release. But don't do this with rats, as it's unsafe and against state law. With both mice and rats, you can also use electronic or snap traps. The latter can go inside an enclosure box. Don't use glue traps, as these can trap other creatures.

**For more tips,** see: The STEP Index under **Rodents** • [www.saferodentcontrol.org/site/rodent-control](http://www.saferodentcontrol.org/site/rodent-control) • [www.msosquito.com/programs-services/rodent-program](http://www.msosquito.com/programs-services/rodent-program)

## The Harm of Rat Poisons

### ■ Humans, including children.

More than 8,000 people were reported poisoned by rodenticides in the U.S. in 2016, according to the American Association of Poison Control Centers — including 6,605 children under age 6. Health impacts can be serious. Children can be exposed by curiously eating discovered baits. People can also be exposed via poisoned game such as deer.

■ **Pet cats and dogs.** About 95,000 pet poisonings from rodenticides were reported to American Poison Control Centers in 2010. A top source of pet poisonings, rodenticides can cause illness (with large vet bills) and death. Pets can be exposed by eating bait, or dead or dying rodents.

■ **Wildlife.** California officials have found rodent poison in more than 37 species of animals, including endangered wildlife. A recent California study reported that rat poisons were found in the bodies of 90% of tested mountain lions, 88% of bobcats, and 70% of northern spotted owls.

Many wild animals have been found dead from eating poisoned rats. Plus, as other animals consume their carcasses, these toxics are passed along and poison the web of life. Even sublethal doses can weaken animals, making them more susceptible to disease and accidents.

SOURCES: <https://bit.ly/2SLHL5F> • [www.birc.org/RaptorQ.pdf](http://www.birc.org/RaptorQ.pdf) • [www.biologicaldiversity.org/news/press\\_releases/2018/rat-poison-12-12-2018.php](http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/news/press_releases/2018/rat-poison-12-12-2018.php)

## ABOUT STEP

The Next STEP (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program (STEP)**. **STEP is a project of the City of Sebastopol**, implemented by local citizen volunteers. **STEP's mission** is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

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## Spring Cleaning with Tea Tree Oil

We've previously talked about how you can use vinegar, liquid soap, and baking soda for most of your housecleaning needs. For more scrubbing power, you can add Bon Ami or Bartender's Friend.

Another handy tool to amp up your cleaning is tea tree oil, a steam distillation of the leaves of the Australian tree *Melaleuca alternifolia*.

To use it, just dilute two teaspoons in two cups of water in a spray bottle and shake. Label the bottle. Then spray it as desired on spots you want to clean, disinfect, and deodorize. You can spray it periodically on your shower curtain, grout, and tub corners. Add some to your cleansing spray, or a few drops to your scented room spray. Or dab a little on a cotton pad and rub into smelly items such as gym shoes. It can even be dabbed on bug bites to soothe them. Just remember that it's strong and a little goes a long way!

For Rebecca Dwan's article on her success using it on bathroom mold, go to the STEP Index under **Tea tree oil**, and click on *II/3*. For more recipes, see [www.apartmenttherapy.com/how-to-disinfect-your-whole-home-with-tea-tree-oil-238685](http://www.apartmenttherapy.com/how-to-disinfect-your-whole-home-with-tea-tree-oil-238685).



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- **Got a pest problem?**
- **Or a toxics question?**
- **The STEP Online Index can help!** It makes it easy to look up your topic of interest and find our well-researched, condensed, and useful information — to help you get up-to-speed and into action. It also makes it easy to share this information!
- **[www.healthyworld.org/STEP](http://www.healthyworld.org/STEP)**
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## Local Toxics Disposal

■ **The next Sebastopol Toxics Collections Day is April 9**, from 4 to 8pm. To make an appointment, call 707/795-2025 or 877/747-1870 at least 24 hours before the event. You can also drop items at the Household Toxics Facility.

■ **For more about local toxics disposal**, see [www.recyclenow.org](http://www.recyclenow.org) or call 707/565-3375.

## Seasonal Detoxing

■ **Wrangling weeds.** The much-appreciated winter rains have likely fed robust weeds in your yard. But don't use toxics on them. Instead, explore and use our tips for less-toxic weed control!

For instance, spray vinegar (diluted or straight) on driveways and gravel areas — anywhere that's separate from your desired plants. Skip the "weed and feed" lawn products; they can include hidden toxic herbicides. Instead, prevent weeds from the start by nurturing a healthy lawn. And remember that some common "weeds" have been traditionally eaten and used for healing!

For a good summary index to our weeds articles, go to the STEP Index under **Weeds** and click on *XVIII/3*.

■ **Managing ants.** Are ants making inroads into your home? To see my systematic less-toxic, and effective approach for managing them, go to the Online STEP Index under **Ants** and click on issue *XVII/1*.

■ **Using home & garden products safely.** As you enjoy your spring gardening, DIY projects, and preparation for summer fun, be sure to read product labels carefully before purchase and use. To learn more about how to do this, see our Index under **Assessing toxics**, *V/4*.

■ **Buying organic fertilizers.** Skip the toxics that can be in mainstream fertilizers. It's not as easy as checking for the word "organic" on a label. Learn what to look for via the STEP Index under **Fertilizers**.