

About the Barn Owl



LEAFLET No 33

Reg. Charity No 299 835

This leaflet describes the appearance, habits and life-cycle of this beautiful bird and the problems that it faces.

Fossil records indicate that the Barn Owl appeared on earth approximately two million years ago - as a species it is about 40 times as old as modern man! Feared by ancient Europeans and revered by Native Americans, few birds have such a supernatural reputation.

Today the Barn Owl is one of the most popular British birds and one of the most extensively studied. The following description is applicable only to the species in Britain. For more information please refer to the books listed in *Further Reading* (leaflet no. 24).

Description

The Barn Owl is about 25cm (10") tall with a wingspan of approximately 85cm (34"). The face, breast and undersides are predominantly white - when seen in flight the impression is of a large white bird. However, if the owl is seen only from behind or above it looks light brown/grey. Its upper-parts are, in fact, a beautiful golden-buff colour, delicately marked in varying shades of grey and buff, sometimes with black and/or white, too. The sexes can be difficult to tell apart, particularly in the field. Differences in size are not necessarily sex-linked. Females often have darker upper surfaces and small black spots on the underside. For more information see *Sexing Barn Owls* (leaflet no. 23).

Barn Owls are not woodland birds and do not hoot. They prefer open habitat and usually hunt by flying slowly back and forth (quartering), about 3m (10') above the ground, looking and listening for their prey. If suitable perches such as fence posts are available, the owls may save energy by hunting from these. Their diet consists mainly of small mammals, particularly field voles, common shrews and wood mice. Prey is often swallowed whole and the indigestible parts, the bones and fur, are regurgitated in the form of a pellet. Analysing Barn Owl pellets can tell you exactly what the owls have eaten. Barn Owl habitat includes rough grassland (where field voles can be numerous), field margins, hedgerows, woodland edge, stubble fields, drainage ditches and farmyards - for more information see *Habitat Management* (leaflet no.1).

Unlike Tawny Owls, Barn Owls are not territorial as their feeding areas are too large to defend. The hunting grounds of adjacent pairs can overlap considerably - only a small area near the nest is defended. The hunting range of individual owls is normally about 1km (approx. ½ mile) in the breeding season and 3km (approx. 2 miles) in winter. Within their home range a pair of Barn Owls may have one breeding site, one or two roosting sites and perhaps a few sites which they only visit, or roost in, occasionally. Adult Barn Owls are highly sedentary - once established, they do not normally leave their home range. Like many people, Barn Owls are very regular in their habits - roosting in exactly the same spot every day and hunting repeatedly over the same areas at night. This gives them a detailed knowledge of their area which helps to maximise their chances of survival.

The Barn Owl's Year

May is the time when most eggs are laid, normally in a dark cavity or on a ledge in an old building or hollow tree. The eggs are white and surprisingly small (about 42mm x 32mm). Incubation begins as soon as the first egg is laid; two or three days later the second is laid, and so on until the clutch is complete. Normally between four and seven eggs are laid over an 8 to 21 day period. Each egg hatches after about 31 days incubation; so by the time the last egg hatches the eldest owlet may be three weeks old. When the youngest owlet reaches three weeks the female stops brooding the young and starts to hunt. Soon after this, the adults start to roost away from the nest, returning each evening to feed the young.

Compared to other owls, Barn Owls grow quite slowly. They are not fully developed until around ten weeks old, by which time they have already taken their first flights. The fledgling owlets only have a few weeks to learn the art of survival before they leave their parents' home range at around 14 weeks. The average number of young which fledge successfully from the nest is around 2.6, although exceptionally as many as seven young can be produced. Occasionally a pair may breed twice in one year if food is plentiful. In such cases a second clutch may be laid in the nest whilst the first brood are still present. Sometimes a second, nearby nest-place is used.

Most young Barn Owls leave their parents' home range in August and some die during their first few weeks of

independence. Many more die during their first autumn, when food is harder to find and the weather is cold and wet. By late November juveniles have normally stopped dispersing and settle into a permanent home range. The average dispersal distance is around 12km (7.5 miles).

Only about one in four young Barn Owls survive to become breeding adults. Although starvation is probably the main cause of mortality, most reported deaths are of birds which die in conspicuous places - and about half of these are road casualties. However, Barn Owls which survive their first year stand a better chance of surviving their second and by the third winter their chances may be better than 50/50. It is very unusual to come across a wild Barn Owl over five years old but the longevity record in Britain is 13.5 years and the European record is 21.

Adult Barn Owls often live in pairs, although many do not roost together all year round. By March pairs are usually roosting together at or near the site where they intend to breed. They engage in courtship behaviour, chasing and screeching around the breeding site, the male often presenting food items to his mate. This helps to ensure that the female is in tip-top condition. All being well, the annual cycle begins again in April or May.

Survival

The number of Barn Owls which survive and their breeding success varies a great deal from year to year. Numbers go up and down naturally, particularly in Northern England and Scotland, as a result of natural cyclic changes in food supply. In southern areas food supply is more constant and the population level more stable. However, across Britain the Barn Owl population has declined tremendously and the bird is nothing like as common as it was in the 1930s. Almost every elderly farmer has childhood memories of seeing "white owls" on the farm - in some cases they were so common that little notice was taken of them. Recent Barn Owl Trust studies have shown that in

some areas less than one farm in fifty now has resident Barn Owls. Devon, a large rural county, may have as few as 350 pairs left. Some of the home counties have only a few pairs.

The main factors limiting the Barn Owl population are lack of prey-rich habitat and lack of ideal places to roost and breed. Other factors such as deaths on major roads are significant in some areas too.

Fortunately there are many people across Britain doing their bit to encourage these wonderful birds. The Barn Owl Trust is carrying out a major programme of practical conservation work, research and education. Nationally, the Trust is the main source of information on Barn Owl conservation with a range of free leaflets and other publications.

© Barn Owl Trust 1999
latest revision 2010

The Barn Owl Trust is a registered charity dedicated to the conservation of the Barn Owl and its environment. You can become a **Friend of the Barn Owl Trust** and support our work by making a regular donation. **Friends** receive our biannual magazine Feedback, our Annual Report and an enamel pin badge.

The Trust provides a wide range of free leaflets on Barn Owl related matters. For details of these and further information about the Trust and its work, please write including a large SAE to:

Barn Owl Trust
Waterleat
Ashburton
Devon
TQ13 7HU

Tel: 01364 653026
Email: info@barnowltrust.org.uk
Web: www.barnowltrust.org.uk



Restoring the Balance

We've lived side-by-side with Barn Owls for centuries. But in modern times wild Barn Owls have become increasingly rare, and the reasons are all man-made. The Barn Owl is a symbol of our relationship with the countryside: the decline of this beautiful bird reflects our attitude towards the environment. No species can prosper in isolation - not even human beings. All things are connected and if we lived in balance with nature then Barn Owls, and so much other wildlife, could thrive.

How you can help

You can help to conserve the Barn Owl by **Becoming a Friend** of the Trust and making an annual or monthly donation to support our work. Fill in and sign the form below along with the Gift Aid and/or Standing Order form and send it to us at the address shown. Paying by Standing Order will reduce our administration time and costs.

BECOMING A FRIEND

UK Friends: Individual £25; Family (same address) £30

Overseas Friends: Individual £30 (sterling); Family (same address) £35 (sterling)

Owlets: UK £25; Overseas £30. Owlets are Junior Friends. (Up to 4 children under 16 at one address) Each child receives a personal ID card, pin badge and other goodies. Please state names and ages on separate sheet.

Name (s) _____

Address _____ Post Code _____

Daytime telephone no _____ Email address _____

I would like to become a Friend/Owlet of the Trust and receive my pack, I enclose £ _____ (see above)

I am pleased to enclose a donation of £ _____

*UK taxpayers please complete the Gift Aid declaration below to enable us to claim tax paid on your donation.

The contact details you submit will be held by the Barn Owl Trust on a secure computer system and may be used by the Trust in pursuit of its aims. Please let us know if you object to this.

GIFT AID DECLARATION

I confirm I have paid or will pay an amount of Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax for each tax year (6 April - 5 April) that is at least equal to the amount of tax that all the charities or CASCs that I donate to will reclaim on my gifts for that tax year. I understand the charity will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 that I give on or after 6 April 2008.

I want the Barn Owl Trust to treat all donations I make on or after the date of this declaration as Gift Aid donations until I notify them otherwise.

Full name _____

Address _____ Post Code _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Note. Please remember to tell us if you no longer pay an amount of income or capital gains tax equal to the tax we reclaim on your donations. Please contact our office if you have any queries.

STANDING ORDER FORM

Name _____ Date _____

Address _____ Postcode _____

Please pay £ _____ On the first day of each **month*/year*** (*delete one) starting in the month of _____ and a like sum on the same date each **month*/year*** until further notice to the account of the Barn Owl Trust (account No 01027812) at Lloyds TSB Bank (sort code 30-98-69) 31 Fore Street, Totnes, Devon, TQ9 5HH

My signature _____ Account No _____ Sort Code _____

To the Manager _____ Bank _____

Bank Address _____ Postcode _____

THIS STANDING ORDER REPLACES ANY EXISTING STANDING ORDERS FROM THIS ACCOUNT TO THE BARN OWL TRUST

Send to **BARN OWL TRUST**, Waterleat, Ashburton, Devon TQ13 7HU

www.barnowltrust.org.uk