



Owl (Barn)

Barn Owl:

Tyto alba



Size:

Up to 36cm (14").

Habitat:

Heaths, woods, fields and hedgerows.

Voice:

Shrill shrieks.

Food:

Insects, shrews, mice, voles, rats, small birds, frogs etc..

Eggs:

4 - 7 (white).

Distribution:

British Isles generally.

Of the five species of owl which breed in Britain the barn owl is becoming much less common generally - and in some places, rare. A recent report suggested that there might be between 4,000 - 5,000 pairs of barn owls living in the British Isles. This is fewer than half the number resident here just fifty years ago although great efforts are now being made to protect the species.

In appearance the barn owl is very distinctive. It has a body length of up to 36cm (14") and has handsome buff-coloured plumage mottled with grey on the upper parts of the body and wings. The heart-shaped head and the underparts of the barn owl are white. The eyes are large and, as with all owls, the head can be turned 180 to permit the bird to look directly backwards.

Breeding may start as early as February or March, with up to seven eggs being laid in a clutch depending on the availability of food. The eggs hatch in about four weeks, during which time the male feeds the female on the nest. Baby owls can fly by the time they are ten weeks old.

The barn owl is, or was, a typical farm-dweller, roosting as its name implies in the timbers of old barns and outbuildings. The species also roosts in church towers, lofts and hollow trees, especially elm.

The decline of the barn owl and the increasing threat to its future survival can be traced to several causes. Probably the most serious problem for the species is finding a suitable nesting site, as many of the old type barn buildings have been replaced by modern structures which do not offer the same opportunities for nesting. Modern churches too leave a great deal to be desired from the owl's point of view, while the elm tree so favoured by barn owls is itself a threatened species thanks to Dutch Elm disease.

Owls are birds of prey, so it is always possible that creatures they eat may have been poisoned by agricultural chemicals of one kind or another. This may not kill the adult owl, but it can result in dead embryos in the eggs.

In the Victorian era, gamekeepers killed barn owls in order to protect young game birds such as pheasant. The fact that the barn owls play an important role in the countryside by killing rats, mice and other vermin was overlooked at that time.

Although the barn owl is widely distributed throughout the British Isles it is nowhere common and appears to be declining steadily in numbers.

Some barn owls are illegally taken and sold to collectors even though the species is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Egg collectors too are a serious threat. They raid barn owls' nests and steal eggs either for their own collection or to sell to others. The taking of eggs is also against the Law, so it must be hoped that those caught stealing or possessing barn owl eggs will be dealt with severely, as this might deter other egg thieves.

Owls are susceptible to disturbance of any kind, especially in the breeding season (February - May) when it could result in the loss of the young.

Low flying can prove a hazard to the barn owl (and motorists too) especially if it chooses to swoop at low level across a busy road.

If we are to keep this handsome owl as a resident species every effort must be made to protect it both now and in the future.

Many farmers have provided owl 'windows' in new barns in an effort to encourage nesting by barn owls. This is the kind of action that will help save the species in Britain, so we can hope that many more farmers and landowners will become involved in the campaign to save the barn owl while there is still time to achieve success.

Useful Websites:

The Barn Owl Trust

<http://www.barnowltrust.org.uk/infopage.html?ld=1>

Hawk and Owl Trust

<http://www.hawkandowl.org/>

World Owl Trust

<http://www.owls.org/>

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