



Owl (Little)

Little Owl:

Athene noctua



Distribution:

throughout central and southern Europe, including England and Wales, but absent from Scotland, Ireland, Iceland and most of Scandinavia.

Habitat:

open country, especially farmland with scattered old trees and old buildings. Also found on edges of moorland, quarries and sand-dunes.

Description:

a small owl with a short flat head. Upper parts are a greyish brown, mottled and barred with white; underparts are paler with broad brown streaks. Large yellow eyes, and greenish bill. Legs and feet are covered with pale, buff feathers.

Size:

about 22cm in height (not much larger than a blackbird).

Food:

mainly invertebrates and small mammals, occasionally small birds.

The little owl was introduced to Britain from Holland in 1889 and it was then known as the 'fierce little

foreigner'. As its Latin name implies, the owl was associated with the Greek goddess Athene. She was originally a goddess of war but was also worshipped as the goddess of the arts of peace and goddess of intelligence. Athene took the owl as her emblem, and its image was stamped on several silver coins. Although the Greeks had a great respect for the little owl, the Romans later regarded it as a bird of ill-omen!

Little Owl Habits

This owl is not strictly nocturnal and is often active during the day (diurnal) and can often be seen perched on fence posts or telegraph poles. If approached it will bob up and down nervously, wagging its head. Sometimes it will be attacked by hordes of other birds, who are not deceived by its small size, recognising it as a fierce predator.

Hunting is carried out mainly at dawn and dusk. The most frequent prey includes beetles, caterpillars, moths, spiders, slugs, mice and voles. Being a fierce, daring bird, equipped with powerful talons, it will tackle mammals and birds of its own size.

Breeding:

during the breeding season, throughout the summer, a pair of owls may be heard calling to each other with a mewling sound. A hollow or crevice in an old tree is usually chosen as a nesting site, but walls of old buildings, rabbit holes and old nests of other hole-nesting birds may also be used. Wherever it is, the cavity usually has at least two exits. Once established, a nest site is often used year after year. No special nesting material is collected.

Three to five smooth white eggs are laid and the female usually begins incubating as soon as the first egg is laid, which means there is normally an age difference of a few days between each fledgling. Sometimes the female does not begin incubating until her clutch is complete. Hatching occurs after 24 to 25 days and the fledglings are covered with a creamy down which later changes to reddish-grey. The young owls are ready to leave the nest in three and a half weeks, but their parents continue to feed them for some time.

Little Owls and Man

The little owl used to be held responsible for the destruction of eggs and young game birds, but analysis of the contents of their pellets proved that this was untrue. Nowadays it is regarded as a useful pest - destroyer in gardens and on farmland.

As with many birds of prey, the little owl population in Britain began to decrease back in the 1960s when organochlorine pesticides were introduced. These dangerous chemicals entered food chains and affected the fertility of predatory animals at the top of the chains, thus reducing their numbers. Since these pesticides were banned, little owl numbers have recovered to some extent and today it is not under any particular threat.

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