



Barn Owl

Key Facts

- traditional farmland bird
- numbers have declined by 70%
- needs suitable nesting sites such as old barns
- feeds on small mammals
- hunts in the dark using its excellent hearing

The Barn Owl *Tyto alba* is a UK BAP species of conservation concern and a Devon BAP priority species. Old hushwing is a traditional resident on British farms but has become increasingly scarce since world war 2. Numbers in England and Wales are thought to have declined by about 70% since the 1930's.

The wings of the Barn Owl make almost no noise in flight, it flies low over the ground when hunting and glides well in calm conditions, all great strategies when you have to catch small voles, shrews and mice with good hearing! When Barn Owl's do want to make a noise though they certainly can. Their other common name is the screech owl thanks to the long drawn out hoarse screaming "shreeeeee" (can also be issued in short bursts), usually used by the male to advertise his territory. The female also screams occasionally and hearing their shrieks can be a very eerie experience if heard while out and about in darkness – some people have mistaken the noise for a child or woman in agony!

Barn Owls (as with other owls) pair for life and stay together for the whole year, occupying a territory of 1 –2 square miles. Males will begin displaying to the females from March onwards (depending on Spring weather and the abundance of small mammals). He will hunt and bring food to the female as a way of 'proving' his ability to supply her with enough food during the time that she is incubating the eggs and brooding the young. They will nest in old farm buildings, old hollow trees and very occasionally, on the ground. They don't actually construct a nest, if they are using a building they will look for a ledge of some kind in the darkest, most secluded part. The loss of old farm buildings and hollow trees is partly to blame for the very worrying decline of this beautiful owl in our countryside.

The Barn Owl has excellent vision and is able to hunt at night in almost total darkness. It also has incredible hearing and can locate prey just from their slight rustling in the undergrowth. Zeroing in on an unfortunate short tailed vole (the preferred prey species), the Owl will sometimes hover momentarily before plunging down with outstretched talons, it will then often carry the vole to a nearby post where it is normally swallowed whole! As well as voles, shrews and mice are also taken. Around the farm house mice, young rats, sparrows and starlings are caught too and in some areas Owls are known to take frogs in the spring. A family of 2 adults and their young can consume over 1000 rodents during their 3 month nesting period.

Wild Barn Owls are threatened in the UK . According to the Hawk Trust (dated 1989), numbers have dropped by 70% since 1932 from 12,000 to around 5000 pairs in the whole of the British Isles . The Barn Owl is an owl of open country it needs traditional farmland and prefers unimproved meadows with thick hedges that provide good habitat for the voles, shrews and mice that it hunts. Loss of this feeding habitat through the intensification of farming is a major reason for their decline, along with loss of nesting sites as already mentioned. In addition the use of pesticides is a problem as the birds can ingest mammals that have consumed poisoned food.

In modern times it has been forced to start using roadside verges and railway banks where the grass is allowed to grow long – the owls pay a terrible price for this new habitat though, because of their low hunting flight many end up as car or train casualties. Providing a Barn Owl box in a suitable farm building (which can be modern or traditional) can be a crucial step in Barn Owl success in that area, as long as the surrounding farmland has meadows which can supply plenty of small mammals.

Sources:

The Barn Owl Trust Website: www.barnowltrust.org.uk

Devon BAP