

Barn Owl

Tyto alba



Description

The Barn Owl is the ghost-like, white owl of country folklore. The upperparts are pale orange-buff with white underparts. The bird is often seen hunting the fields and hedgerows during the last light of the day. The Barn Owl is found in almost every continent and is one of the most widely distributed land birds in the world. It nests and roosts in tree cavities, old and derelict farm buildings and barns, and produces 4–6 eggs, which are incubated for 30 days. Young birds fly after 50 days but are dependent on the parents for food for a further 3–5 weeks. Barn Owls feed mainly on small mammals such as Rats, Mice, Voles and Shrews.

The presence of Barn Owls is a good indicator of the health of biodiversity in lowland areas, as the range of habitats needed by the species is also vital for a wide range of other animals and plants.

National Status

The Barn Owl was quite a common sight in the 19th century, but the UK population has fallen by an estimated 90% since 1830.

The decline has been particularly sharp in the last half of the 20th century, mainly due to agricultural intensification. Recent national population figures (1996) put numbers at 3,750 pairs in England and Wales and 650 pairs in Scotland. With the addition of some non-breeding birds, the total figure is around 10,000 birds.

Local Status

Described in 1844 by naturalist Dr Farrar as being 'abundantly numerous everywhere' but now, sadly, fairly scarce. Most Barn Owls in the area are located in the eastern half of Barnsley where there are still extensive areas of rough grassland on post-industrial land. There were 12 pairs in the borough in 1996 (survey carried out by Carr and Massey, 1996) and this has now increased to at least 18 pairs (Carr, 2006 survey).

Legal Status

Protected in Britain under Schedule 1 and Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981: EC Birds Directive; Appendix 1 I of Bern Convention. It is a priority species under European Law. It is an offence to kill or injure a Barn Owl or to disturb it while it is using a nest.

Links with other Action Plans

- HAP5 Hedgerows
- HAP6 Arable Field Margins
- HAP7 Floodplain Grazing Marsh
- HAP8 Lowland Meadows
- HAP9 Lowland Dry Acidic Grassland
- HAPI5 Ponds
- HAPI6 Rivers
- HAPI7 Open Mosaic Habitats on Previously Developed Land

Current Factors Causing Loss or Decline

- The main factor for the decline of the Barn Owl is thought to be the loss of suitable feeding habitat, resulting from the intensification of agriculture. Contributory factors are believed to be past severe winters, toxic pesticides in the 1950s to 1970s, second generation rodenticides in the 1980s and 1990s and urbanisation (including increased mortality due to road traffic).

Current Local Action

- Some private landowners manage areas of actual or potential Barn Owl habitat and have a vital part to play in conserving the species.
- New areas of suitable habitat have been created on post-industrial land that will help to maintain the species.
- Barn Owls have been monitored in the past by the BTO/Hawk and Owl Trust, by BTO/FWAG and Barnsley Bird Study Group recorders.
- A comprehensive survey of Barn Owls in the borough was carried out in 2006 and published by Barnsley Biodiversity Trust.

Proposed Local Action

- Provide and install nest boxes at suitable sites and preferably away from busy main roads to prevent road deaths.
- Monitor the population of breeding Barn Owls.
- Assess current coverage of DEFRA Stewardship Schemes that support Barn Owl options (with Natural England).
- Encourage landowners to take up a Stewardship Scheme to benefit Barn Owl (Natural England lead).

BMBC Planning Policy Actions

- Include habitat and species protection policies in development plans and/or supplementary guidance.
- Promote awareness of the legal protection afforded to Barn Owls among landowners, planning officers and contractors.

BMBC Development Control Actions

- When assessing applications for the conversion of old or derelict agricultural buildings, ensure that they will not result in damage to Barn Owl nest and roost sites and adjacent habitats. Barnsley MBC must consult Natural England if there is reason to believe that Barn Owls may be present.
- Encourage the use of Barn Owl boxes, both in new buildings and in the renovation of existing structures.
- Give advice on farm building conversions where Barn Owls may be present, particularly at the planning application stage.
- Use best practice to ensure that design and management of river corridors and roadside habitats take Barn Owls into account.

BMBC Land Ownership and Management Actions

- Landowners to be advised on land management for Barn Owls and establish a database of landowners supporting the conservation programmes.
- Encourage land management suitable to Barn Owls throughout the borough, especially between breeding sites and along river corridors.