

Shropshire

Barn Owl

Group



2005 Report

Providing nestboxes for barn Owls and
promoting their conservation in Shropshire



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The Shropshire Barn Owl Group

This is the third annual report of the Shropshire Barn Owl Group (SBOG) which summarises our results and activities for 2005. The year was extraordinarily successful for barn owls in Shropshire with more breeding pairs occupying nestboxes and more young produced in both nestboxes and natural nest sites monitored by SBOG than in all the three previous years combined. The policy of SBOG in siting nestboxes on land with large areas of permanent rough grassland or farms enrolled in environmental stewardship schemes and supporting extensive margins of rough grassland appears to be increasingly effective.

SBOG formed in 2002 and aims to increase the breeding population of barn owls in Shropshire by providing nestboxes in areas of suitable habitat and working with farmers and landowners to enhance their habitat. The group is a voluntary organisation which depends on raising funds and donations to accomplish its conservation work.

What we do

- Conduct site surveys and promote the conservation of barn owl habitat with farmers, landowners, statutory authorities, conservation organisations and other interested individuals.
- Operate a nestbox scheme for barn owls in Shropshire to replenish natural nest sites in trees and buildings lost to decay and development.
- Monitor nestboxes and natural sites under licence from English Nature for occupation by breeding and roosting barn owls.
- Maintain a database of breeding sites, nestbox occupation and breeding success.
- Provide advice and practical assistance to local authorities, developers and home owners where planning applications affect barn owl nest sites.
- Observe barn owls throughout Shropshire and research aspects of their behaviour in order to better understand their habitat requirements.
- Share our findings and knowledge of barn owls through reports, general articles, illustrated talks and events.

Some of SBOG's achievements so far

- 102 site surveys completed and advice given to farmers and other landowners
- 176 nestboxes installed across Shropshire
- 33 breeding attempts by barn owls in nestboxes
- 103 young produced in nestboxes
- 104 chicks produced in natural nest sites monitored by SBOG
- Maintain a database of 161 breeding pairs
- Commented on 4 planning applications involving barn owls

Cover photo: Mike Wooton. Other photos: John Lightfoot and Glenn Bishton.
Illustrations: Glenn Bishton

Why barn owls need our help

In 1932 there were 287 breeding pairs of barn owl in Shropshire. In 2002 we estimated the population at 121 to 140 pairs: - a loss of around 150 pairs! (see report 'An estimate of the breeding population of Barn Owls *Tyto alba* in Shropshire 2002' In the Shropshire Ornithological Society 2002 Annual Report). The national population has declined from 12000 pairs to 4000 pairs and the barn owl is amber-listed (medium conservation concern) in the UK. The barn owl is also on the Biodiversity Steering Group Conservation Concern List. The steep decline has been attributed to a number of factors but mainly:

- The loss of prey-rich foraging habitat on farmland
- A reduction in the availability of nest sites in old trees and barns
- Urbanisation, pesticides and road casualties

How you can help

- Contact us if you see barn owls on your land and you have the right habitat and would like to encourage barn owls to breed. Barn owls require **large fields of permanent rank and ungrazed tussocky grassland or extensive grassy margins where the grass is maintained to a height of 20-40cm**. This provides barn owls with a high density of small mammal prey on which they depend.
- If you have recently entered into DEFRA's Entry Level Stewardship or Higher Level Stewardship scheme, creating grass margins around arable fields or set-aside permanent rough grassland, contact us to arrange a site survey.
- Send us records of barn owl sightings, especially during the breeding season March to August. Remember, barn owls are light brown above with white underparts, inhabit open grassland and give a loud 'screech': tawny owls 'hoot' and are found in woodlands.
- Let us know of breeding sites so that we can update our site records.
- Report sightings of dead barn owls.
- External tree nestboxes cost £50 and are our biggest expense. Could you donate boards of external plywood or perhaps help us by raising funds?
- Could you make a few nestboxes for us in your spare time? We can supply a cutting plan and the materials.
- Several supporters have sponsored a nestbox, which we install in their name and keep informed of developments each year.



Results of the 2005 breeding season

The nestbox scheme

SBOG confirmed breeding barn owls at 34 sites. Of these sites, 20 related to breeding pairs in SBOG's nestbox scheme and included Adeney, Allscott, Clive (2), Colemere (2), Crudgington, Doley, Ellesmere (3), Kynnersley, Lyneal, Preston-on-the-Weald Moors, Rednal, Soudley, Weald Moors (3) and Welsh Frankton. Breeding was confirmed in 14 natural tree or building nest sites at Adderley, Cressage, Dryton, Ellesmere, Kemberton, Lyneal, Moreton Corbett, Moreton Say, Peaton, Pentre Wern, Quina Brook, Stanton Lacey, Upton Cressett and Waters Upton.

Of 135 internal and external barn owl nestboxes available at the start of the breeding season, 22 supported breeding pairs and 31 were occupied by roosting birds at some point in the year (Table 1). Table 1 includes both successful and unsuccessful breeding attempts by barn owl pairs. The occupancy rate for barn owls was 39.25%.

Other nestboxes held breeding kestrel (2), stock dove (15), jackdaw (14) and squirrel (6). SBOG had 176 nestboxes in place at the end of 2005.

Table 1. Occupation of nestboxes by barn owls
Shropshire Barn Owl Group 2005

Nestbox type	No. nestboxes Monitored	No. nestboxes occupied		Total occupied	% occupied
		Breeding	Roosting		
Building	48	9	10	19	39.58
Tree	76	13	18	31	40.78
Pole	11	0	3	3	27.27
Total	135	22	31	53	39.25

Breeding success in nestboxes and natural sites

Table 2 summarises the breeding success of barn owls in 2005 in both nestboxes and natural sites in Shropshire. The data is confined to successful breeding attempts, that is, pairs producing chicks. Only two pairs completed clutches which subsequently failed to hatch. In view of the difficulty in directly recording the fledging of young barn owls, breeding success of barn owl pairs is measured as chick productivity. 67 chicks were produced in the nestboxes. Two natural building nest sites and 12 natural tree cavity nest sites monitored by SBOG in 2005 produced an additional 45 chicks. The natural nest sites in buildings included hay bales in a modern agricultural building and the chimney of a ruined building. The total number of chicks produced in all sites monitored by SBOG was 112 and brood sizes ranged from 1 to 6 young, mean 3.29 per pair.

Table 2. Number of barn owl chicks produced in nestboxes and natural nest sites

Shropshire Barn Owl Group 2005

Nest site	No. nests	No. chicks	Mean No. chicks
Building nestbox	8	27	3.37
Tree nestbox	12	40	3.33
Building natural	2	6	3.00
Tree cavity natural	12	39	3.25
Total	34	112	3.29

Pairs were well established at nest sites by the end of March with the first egg recorded on 1 April (compared to 5 May in 2004) though there were indications from two nestboxes that pairs had raised young in the boxes prior to monitoring much earlier in the season and that they had fledged by the time the boxes were inspected in the summer months. 13 chicks were ringed by a BTO licensed ringer.

SBOG conducted 37 site surveys in 2005 as part of its ongoing programme of identifying suitable sites for barn owl nestboxes and providing advice to farmers and landowners on habitat creation and management. As well as looking at farm and other private land, SBOG was invited by Severn Trent to survey their reservoirs in the county. Two sites were identified which supported suitable rough grassland feeding habitat and mature isolated trees and we were able to install one nestbox at one of the sites with another planned for early 2006.



A summary of barn owl breeding results 2002-2005

Table 3 summarises the occupation of nestboxes by barn owls for the four years 2002 to 2005. The average occupancy rate is 34.47% and is greater for tree nestboxes (36.77%) than building nestboxes (30.32%). The occupancy rate for pole nestboxes should be treated with caution due to the low number of nestboxes of this type installed to date but might indicate that the effectiveness of positioning nestboxes on poles directly within good barn owl hunting habitat and where the absence of suitable isolated trees might have been restricting nesting attempts.

**Table 3. Nestbox occupation by Barn Owls
2002-2005
Shropshire Barn Owl Group**

B= Breeding R=Roosting

Year	Total No. nestboxes monitored	Building				Tree				Pole				No. nestboxes occupied	% of all nestbox types occupied
		No. boxes	B	R	%	No. boxes	B	R	%	No. boxes	B	R	%		
2002	13	7	0	3	42	6	1	0	16	N/A	0	0	0	4	30
2003	48	26	2	4	23	22	1	6	31	N/A	0	0	0	13	27
2004	97	41	4	5	21	51	4	14	27	5	0	4	80	31	31
2005	135	48	9	10	39	76	13	18	40	11	0	3	27	53	39
Total	293	122	15	22	30	15	19	38	36	16	0	7	43	101	34

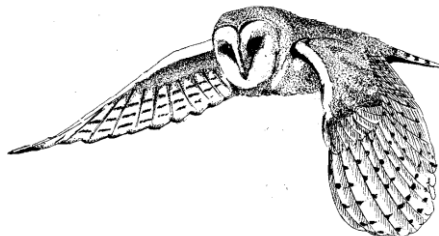
Table 4 summarises breeding success for nestboxes and natural nest sites monitored by SBOG for the four years 2002 to 2005. 103 chicks have been produced in SBOG nestboxes since its inception in 2002 and 104 in natural sites. The mean number of chicks produced is 3.08 per pair. Productivity is marginally highest in natural building sites at 3.25 and lowest in natural tree sites at 2.93 young but the relatively small amount of data from building nest sites should presently be treated with caution. Nestboxes have produced an average of 3.21 chicks per nest site with productivity marginally highest in tree nestboxes.

**Table 4. Number of chicks produced according to nest site
2002-2005
Shropshire Barn Owl Group**

Figures in parentheses refer to number of broods

Year	Building nestbox		Tree nestbox		Pole nestbox		Building natural		Tree cavity natural		Total No. chicks	Mean No. chicks
	No. chicks	Mean	No. chicks	Mean	No. chicks	Mean	No. Chicks	Mean	No. chicks	Mean		
2002	0 (0)	0	4 (1)	4.0	N/A	N/A	0 (0)	0	20 (6)	3.3	24 (7)	3.4
2003	6 (2)	3.0	2 (1)	2.0	N/A	N/A	2 (1)	2.0	18 (8)	2.2	28 (12)	2.3
2004	12 (4)	3.0	12 (4)	3.0	0	0	5 (1)	5.0	14 (5)	2.8	43 (14)	3.0
2005	27 (8)	3.37	40 (12)	3.33	0	0	6 (2)	3.00	39 (12)	3.2 5	112 (34)	3.29
Total nest sites	14		18		0		4		31		67	
Total chicks	45		58		0		13		91		207	
Mean No. chicks	3.21		3.22		0		3.25		2.93		3.08	

Nestbox occupation by 20 successful breeding pairs of barn owl in 2005 exceeded the previous three years of 12 pairs combined. Similarly 110 chicks produced in all sites with 67 in nestboxes exceeded the previous three year combined total of 95 chicks for all sites and 35 for nestboxes. The indications are that barn owls nationally had a good breeding season due to a mild winter prior to the breeding season and high numbers of small mammal prey as a result of abundant seed and berry food resources. However, SBOG's policy of targeting nestboxes at farms enrolled in agri-environment schemes with extensive areas of grassy headlands and siting networks of new nestboxes near to existing pairs to allow for occupation by dispersing young is probably assisting the creation of viable populations of barn owl.



Current nestbox projects

As well as responding to requests from farmers and landowners from across Shropshire to survey their sites and provide assistance in encouraging barn owls to breed, SBOG has a number of defined projects where we aim to provide a series of interconnected nestboxes in areas of good barn owl habitat. The aim is that dispersing young will be able to settle near their natal area and stable and viable breeding populations will be established.

We use nestboxes of three main types: modified tea chests are used for internal sites, 'A' shaped or rectangular shaped external nestboxes fixed to the trunks of isolated trees and rectangular boxes with an apex roof are used where there are no suitable trees and a pole is required to support the nestbox. Tree boxes and pole boxes are positioned at a height of around 3 metres and facing east to reduce the impact of strong westerly winds and rain. We have developed our own design – the 'Shrop' box – which is essentially a rectangular nestbox for fixing to tree trunks. The design has the advantage of a flat roof on which emerging nestlings can rest and practice flying and is also cheaper and easier to construct than the 'A' shaped boxes.

Two or more external nestboxes might be installed on a site but a cost of around £50 per box tends to focus the mind a little and ensure that we are as sure as we can be that barn owls will be interested! Fortunately, many landowners offer to cover the cost of the nestboxes, and as a voluntary group dependant on raised funds, this is most welcome and allows us to be proactive in targeting other sites across the county.

We envisage that new nestboxes installed in sites where barn owls have not been recorded in recent years or where the habitat has only recently been improved will take several years before they are occupied. The nestbox scheme is therefore viewed as a long-term project and we look forward to new pairs being established in nestboxes over time with the careful targeting of suitable sites.

The Weald Moors Project

The Weald Moors comprises an area of mixed farmland covering 50 square kilometres immediately north of Telford. Historically marshland, much of the land has been continuously drained by drainage ditches since at least 1576, and possibly more intensively from the 1800's. This has created level plough land of peat interspersed with rectangular fields of poplar. However, the water table remains near the surface and barn owls are able to hunt along the grassy ditch banks and patches of marsh. Several farms are enrolled in agri-environment schemes with low density grazing and grassy headlands, providing extensive areas of good barn owl habitat.

Two additional nestboxes were installed on The Weald Moors in 2005 on a new site after SBOG contacted the landowner requesting permission. The farm is in DEFRA's Countryside Stewardship scheme and supports some excellent rough grassland habitat. Fortunately, the owners were very interested and one internal tea chest and one tree nestbox were duly installed in April. We also learned that barn owls produced 2 chicks in a nestbox on another new Weald Moors site where SBOG had been able to offer advice in 2003 and the owner had independently installed three nestboxes (see

article on page 13 by Mary O'Neil). This brings the total number of nestboxes on The Weald Moors to 29 on eleven sites. Breeding was confirmed in eight nestboxes, five of which were occupied by new breeding pairs for the first time, and 25 chicks produced. The total number of chicks produced in The Weald Moor nestboxes since 2002 is 39.

One of the sites that saw barn owls breeding in a nestbox for the first time was on land managed by Harper Adams University College Farm (HAUC Farm). A tea chest installed in a farm building in 2004 produced three chicks and it is hoped that young dispersing from this site might be encouraged to establish new pairs by the extensive rough grass margins created on the farm under Countryside Stewardship and additional nestboxes provided by SBOG. A bird survey commissioned by HAUC Farm manager, Scott Kirby, and undertaken by Glenn Bishton over the winter and summer of 2004/05 revealed a rich diversity of birdlife including several red-listed (high conservation concern) breeding birds – skylark, tree sparrow, linnets, bullfinch, yellowhammer and reed bunting. The creation of wild-bird seed mixes, conservation headlands and other initiatives has resulted in 57 breeding species, including birds of county conservation interest such as yellow wagtail and corn bunting.



Three breeding pairs of barn owl on one single farm on The Weald Moors were notable. Two of these were new pairs occupying nestboxes for the first time since they were installed in 2003. One pair successfully produced four chicks and the other laid a clutch of three eggs which subsequently failed to hatch. However, the pair was continuing to occupy the nestbox in September and, as both nestboxes are on land in environmental stewardship with extensive areas of permanent rough grassland and grass margins, the prospect of regular occupation in the future looks promising.

The number of barn owl pairs on The Weald Moors has increased consistently from one known pair in 2002 to nine in 2005. This emphasises the value of installing new nestboxes in good barn owl habitat on the perimeter of existing barn owl ranges to provide sites for dispersing juveniles.

The River Severn and River Tern Project

This project aims to establish additional breeding barn owls along the River Severn and River Tern southeast of Shrewsbury. 20 nestboxes have been installed in the River Severn and Tern corridor since 2002.

In our 2004 report we optimistically wrote that barn owl nestboxes installed at Allscott Sugar Factory in January 2004 would hopefully attract breeding barn owls in 2005. Our optimism was well founded as a pair set up residence and successfully produced three young in a tree nestbox. This was all the more pleasing in that we have been informed

that barn owls have not bred at the site for around twenty years. The availability of five nestboxes in what is particularly good barn owl hunting habitat should hopefully secure the breeding of barn owls on the site.

Two nestboxes installed at Bull farm, Kenley, in April 2005 supported pellets and a roosting barn owl in June. The farmer, Steve Wild (see article on page 12) has developed several kilometres of grass margins and wildbird strips under DEFRA's Entry Level stewardship scheme which provides some excellent barn owl hunting habitat as well as providing seeds for finches and buntings and nectar for butterflies. Here, Steve has shown real enthusiasm and determination in creating some invaluable wildlife habitat in what is otherwise intensive farmland and we are optimistic that barn owls will breed in 2006.

The presence of two barn owls and numerous pellets at the tree nestbox at the Shropshire Ornithological Society's Venus Pool reserve in December 2004 looked promising for 2005. However, despite installing a back-up pole nestbox in rough grassland a few hundred metres away the birds did not remain to breed. Similarly, barn owls did not breed at Buildwas where SBOG had installed three nestboxes built by staff at Ironbridge Power Station in 2003. One nestbox was occupied by a pair of kestrel and produced four chicks.

The Bridgnorth Project

Analysis of both SBOG and Shropshire Ornithological Society barn owl records in 2002 suggested that there were probably only 7 pairs in the Bridgnorth area with breeding confirmed at only one of the sites. SBOG was therefore eager to commence a project in Bridgnorth in order to obtain a better understanding of the barn owl population there and to enhance their numbers.

The Bridgnorth Project now comprises 11 nestboxes on 6 sites in and around Bridgnorth. Our hopes of securing the first breeding pair of barn owls in a nestbox in the Bridgnorth area were raised when the landowner at Aston Eyre informed us that two barn owls were frequently flying in and out of his barn in which SBOG has installed a tea chest nestbox in 2004. Unfortunately, when contacted later, he informed us that he had not seen the barn owls for a while and, sadly, when the nestbox was inspected in July a dead barn owl was found in the box. Its cause of death was unknown.

Two tree nestboxes adjacent to the above site contained pellets for the first time, good news since the nestboxes had only been installed in the previous year. Elsewhere, barn owls were recorded at two other sites in the Bridgnorth area for the first time (the nestboxes having been installed in the autumn of 2004). In April Mike Wooton contacted SBOG to tell us of a pair of barn owls frequenting an ash tree a few metres from his front door at Upton Cressett. On inspecting the site in July, three chicks were recorded at the foot of the hollow trunk and Mike was subsequently able to update us on their progress from his ringside seat. With Mikes help SBOG plans to survey the neighbouring land and install nestboxes. So, perhaps 2006 might well see the first successful breeding of barn owls in a Bridgnorth nestbox.

Barn Owl Road Casualties

Road casualties

SBOG has been collating data on barn owls found dead on roadsides since 2002. Many of the birds are found by members of the group or reported to us or The Shropshire Ornithological Society. Birds found dead on roads are likely to be the result of collisions with vehicles. The light weight and buoyant flight of barn owls hunting over grassy verges adjacent to main roads renders them vulnerable to being caught up in the slip-stream of a passing vehicle and death is usually caused by collision with the following vehicle

The table below indicates that that A5 and A483 cause the most deaths and are a serious threat to barn owls. Two casualties were recorded on B roads in 2005 for the first time. Of the 33 road victims identified, 27 (81%) relate to the winter period October to March. This period correlates with the dispersal of juveniles from the natal site and an increase in the hunting range of adult barn owls of up to 5km from the nest site. Three casualties recorded for the first time in September 2005 may have been young birds originating from unusually early successful breeding attempts in the spring. Of those casualties identified according to sex, most are females.

Barn Owl Road Casualties Shropshire 2002-2005															
Road	Male	Female	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Total
A5 Telford–Oswestry	1	2	1	2	1							1	3	2	10
A483 Pant–Oswestry	3	1		3	2			1							6
A49 Ludlow-Whitchurch					1						1	1			3
A41 Albrighton-Whitchurch		1										2	1		3
A495 Oswestry-Whitchurch		3						1					2		3
A53 Market Drayton Bypass					1						2				3
A458 Halfway House-B'nort												1	1		2
Other A roads		1											1		1
B roads									1		1				
Total	4	8	1	5	5			2	1	3	6	8	2	33	

The Highways Agency in conjunction with the Shropshire Wildlife Trust produced a press release in the Shropshire Star in December highlighting the numerous deaths of barn owls on roads attributable to collisions with vehicles. The intention is to identify potential hotspots where barn owls are frequently killed and then attempt to reduce collisions by appropriate management of the verges. Working with SBOG the agency also hopes to prevent barn owls from coming into contact with major roads by providing nestboxes well away from roads. The agency is to fund six nestboxes and SBOG will work to identify suitable sites in 2006.

Barn Owls and environmental stewardship A farmers perspective

Kindly produced by Steve Wild of Bull Farm, Kenley, this article takes a look at barn owl conservation and the value of DEFRA's environmental stewardship schemes from a farmers perspective. It also illustrates how quickly barn owls can be encouraged to new sites when suitable habitat is created and nestboxes are installed. Steve contacted SBOG in the spring of 2005 and two tree nestboxes were installed on 3 April. By June a barn owl was in residence!

I run a small mixed livestock farm with my father and have done so since I left Agricultural College in 1992.

I have always had a great interest in nature since I was a small boy, when my father would take me for a walk around the farm on a Sunday morning. I seemed to have to run to keep up with his giant strides around the fields and hedgerows, only having chance to rest when he found something of interest he felt I should see.

It is this search for nature's calling cards which led me to the Shropshire Barn Owl Group. I had been spraying weeds from around hedge plants I had planted the year before, when I saw what I thought was fox muck, so I picked it up to see if I could tell what Mr Fox had been eating, when I suspected it looked more like the owl pellets I had dissected in A level Biology at school all those years before! It was at that point I called Shropshire Wildlife Trust and was pointed towards Glenn Bishton and John Lightfoot and soon found myself explaining how our farm had joined the countryside stewardship three years ago.

We have planted flower rich grassland strips for Bumble Bees and Butterflies which now have matured into a great habitat for a wide range of creatures including voles and wood mice due to close proximity to our mature woodland and hedges. This has only been possible due to the funding from DEFRA which has allowed us to swap from growing cereal crops to growing environmentally enhancing field margins.

We contacted SBOG in the spring of 2005 and with their help are the proud owners of two Barn Owl nest boxes placed on hedgerow Oak trees, one of which people walk under whilst using our bridle path. It was this box that I first noticed flies around and white marks spilling out of the bottom drainage holes which turned out to be droppings only a few weeks after installing.

The Entry Level Scheme which was launched in 2005 by DEFFRA should allow more farmers to help Barn Owls if they choose the right field margin options. The best thing is nature often does not want the most productive land, far from it; the marginal areas of the farm which often cost the most to produce traditional crops on can be encouraged to help wildlife, while leaving the rest of the field to produce crops more efficiently. Areas in the shade of woods, short ground in the corners of fields are all crying out for environmental upgrades!

We have educational access on our farm (free at point of use), so any groups who want to see what can be done please get in touch. I also need help listing all the birds which we have so I can pass this on to visiting school parties. A little help is worth a lot of sympathy so buy British food to help British farmers support British wildlife.

Steve Wild
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Email. Wildsarahjane@aol.com

Barn Owls, Buildings and the Law



The barn owl is on Schedule I of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 under which it is an offence to take, injure or kill any wild barn owl, or take or destroy an egg or damage a nest whilst it is in use. In addition, the Countryside and Rights of way Act 2000 deems reckless disturbance of a barn owl at or near the nest an offence. Disturbance may be deemed reckless if it is committed by someone who could be expected to know that the birds

might be present but failed to check. Under the act it is illegal to release barn owls into the wild in Britain without a license.

With a little care and imagination the presence of breeding barn owls in a building under development does not have to be a problem and both birds and owners can be accommodated. In one recent case, SBOG was able to give advice on providing alternative nest and roost sites for barn owls following the development of a building that had supported breeding barn owls. Mary O'Neill, who lived adjacent to the proposed development, was determined to ensure that the barn owls remained in the area once the building had been demolished and the site redeveloped. Mary takes up the story.

"After your site visit we put up three barn owl nestboxes to try and entice the pair of barn owls from their long term home (as you will remember it was a derelict house next door to us which was due for demolition). The house was knocked down in December 2004 (the sympathetic JCB driver was very careful to make sure the owls had flown before starting!) and that evening I saw the barn owls circling around the old house. It was quite distressing to witness their bewilderment. They then disappeared and I did not see them for a few

days until they started to come back and hunt over their familiar ground. I was so relieved as I thought we had lost them altogether

We then discovered that two adults were using a fourth nestbox in a tree in our neighbours paddock and the young were in the nestbox on the telegraph pole which we had provided on our land. Although we had provided two other nestboxes in trees they had chosen the box on the pole, which did seem a little exposed, but which was the nearest box to their original nest site in the old house. When they were old enough, they appeared to move out of their birth nestbox and 'de-camp' to their parents nestbox. It was lovely to see all four owls perched on or near the nestbox and then each of them flying around looking for food as the babies became more confident at flying.

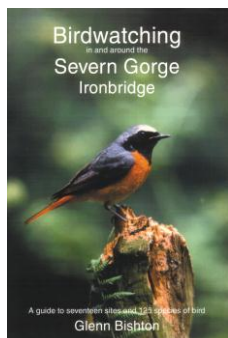
What was also lovely to see was that the adult owls during the summer were constantly in and out of the other two nestboxes on our land. They now seem to have accepted these as alternative accommodation! We are so pleased that the barn owls decided to stay around us and also adopt the nestboxes that I had to tell you about them. Many thanks for all your help and advice - without you we would have had no idea how to provide the barn owls with another home".

Illustrated talks and events

Members of the group gave illustrated talks in 2005 to the Stretton Branch of the Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Welshampton Village Hall Club and the Caradoc and Severn Valley Field Club and led a guided bird walk in the Severn Gorge for the South Staffs Naturalists Society. SBOG also gave a showing of the Barn Owl Trust video 'Wings of Change' to pupils of Church Preen School and helped with the dissection of owl pellets: a nestbox was also installed in the school grounds. The proceeds from these events were added to the SBOG's funds. SBOG helped with a stall making nestboxes for small birds at a countryside activity event organised by Madeley Parish Council at Madeley Park, Telford in October. A press release issued by Ironbridge Power Station for the Shropshire Star in February highlighted the importance given to barn owl conservation by the power station on their land and the work SBOG is undertaking with them to secure a breeding pair of barn owls on site. John Lightfoot completed a number of volunteer weeks at the Barn Owl Trust headquarters in Ashburton, Devon, keeping us up to date with the latest developments in UK barn owl conservation.

Birdwatching guide to the Severn Gorge

Glenn Bishton has produced a guide entitled 'Birdwatching in and around the Severn Gorge, Ironbridge' which provides information on finding 125 species of birds in seventeen sites. Sites include the Severn Gorge woodlands, the River Severn, The Wrekin and Ercall and sites in Buildwas, Broseley, Sheinton and Little Wenlock. 77 pages and fully illustrated with black and white drawings, colour photos and maps. Available from Glenn Bishton, Severn Gorge Books, Butchers Cottage, 52 Waterloo Street, Ironbridge, Telford TF8 7AA. Tel. 01952 433949. Price £9.99. A donation of £1.00 from the sale of each book is made to the Shropshire Barn Owl Group. £100 has so far been raised.



THANK YOU

Much of the conservation work undertaken by the Shropshire Barn Owl Group is accomplished in partnership with a variety of organisations and we wish to express our gratitude and thanks to the following for their support: The Barn Owl Trust, Shropshire Ornithological Society, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, WildAid, Allscott Sugar Factory, Ironbridge Power Station (Eon Power), Harper Adams University College, Severn Trent, The Forestry Commission and The Environment Agency. A special thank you to the Trustees of the William Dean Trust who have put their faith in us over the last four years and have given us the opportunity to make much of this possible. We also received a generous donation from the Cardoc & Severn Valley Field Club in December and we are very grateful to them for their support and their concern for the barn owl in Shropshire.

There are several 'silent' helpers whose names do not appear in the literature for one reason or another but who have provided invaluable support on various projects during the year, either willingly or by default! They are Annette Bishton, Victoria Fennell, Richard Fennell, Jonathan Lightfoot, Wendy Arrowsmith, Neil Jones, John Turner, Leo Smith, Mike Wootton, Brian Dale, Bill Roberts, Barry Davies and Alan Russon. Margot Manuel, Delaine Haynes and Margaret Harper have generously sponsored nestboxes.

We are also grateful to the many people who keep us informed of barn owl nest sites and sightings. These records enable us to maintain an accurate database of breeding barn owls and sites in Shropshire and also ensure that the nest sites remain viable. For example, we can monitor decaying trees and intervene by substituting a nestbox where appropriate. Richard Camp of the SOS kindly kept us informed of barn owl sightings from birdwatchers across the county.

We are indebted to the many farmers and landowners across Shropshire who are concerned for their barn owls and who have contacted us for our assistance or have responded with good grace to our requests to install nestboxes on their land. This report is intended to go some way in keeping them informed about the conservation of the barn owl in Shropshire and to thank them for their support and co-operation. For site confidentiality reasons we do not propose to name them here but we hope that they all know how much we appreciate their help and can assure them that as a result of their commitment the prospects for the barn owl in Shropshire are a little more positive.



Barn Owl Habitat

What Barn Owl's Need

Research has shown that a breeding pair of barn owl range over around three square kilometres, depending upon the habitat, and hunt mainly within 1 kilometre of their nest site in summer but will feed or roost up to 5 kilometres away in winter. Within their range they require around 4 hectares (10 acres) of damp, tussocky grassland which is permanent and ungrazed or 8 to 15 kilometres of 3 to 5 metre wide grassy margins. The structure of the grass is important and should comprise a thick sward 20-40 cm high and remain largely unmanaged to allow a dense thatch of fallen stems and leaves to develop at the base of the tussocks. This will create shelter and nest places for field voles and other small mammal prey on which barn owls depend for food.

Suitable tussock forming perennial grasses include false oat-grass, timothy grass, cocksfoot, meadow foxtail, meadow fescue and wood false-brome. A Mix that incorporates some softer, less fibrous grasses to provide nutritious food for field voles is preferable and could include Yorkshire fog, meadow fescue, smooth meadow grass, rough meadow grass, small cat's-tail, sweet vernal grass or velvet bent.

Linear edge features on farmland such as hedgerows, headlands, drainage ditches, fence lines, bank slopes and woodland edge provide habitat for the barn owl's small mammal prey and are therefore important foraging areas. In urban areas, road verges, railway embankments, development land and other unmanaged grass fields provide suitable foraging habitat. Intensively grazed land and crops are poor habitat.

Barn owls need several cavities in large old trees or outbuildings within their home range for both nesting and roosting. Barn owls are susceptible to wet and inclement weather and nestboxes provide relatively secure, dry and warm breeding and roost sites for barn owls which probably enhances their survival.

What you can do

- On arable farmland, retain existing grass margins, preferably at least 3 metres in width, or sow new ones along hedgerows, field headlands, riverbanks, ditches and field corners.
- On grazing land consider pulling a temporary fence line back a few metres from a hedge or ditch to allow the grass to develop naturally.
- Where grass mowing is essential to prevent the development of scrub, consider topping different patches in rotation over several years and set the mower to its maximum height.
- Retain posts as hunting perches.
- Retain decaying hedgerow trees with holes and cavities to provide barn owl nest sites.
- Provide nestboxes available from the Shropshire Barn Owl Group. We charge a nominal £50 each to help cover our costs. We will construct, install and monitor the nestboxes.
- Retain old barns and stock shelters, or where they are to be developed, consider incorporating a loft space for breeding barn owls.
- Where rodent control is unavoidable use less toxic first generation rodenticides such as warfarin rather than the more toxic second generation brodifacoum
- Contact DEFRA www.defra.gov.uk to obtain options for creating barn owl habitat under the Entry Level or Higher Level Stewardship schemes.