

Bringing the Barn Owl back to Shropshire

A barn owl floating silently on the still air of a summers evening or flitting over hedgerows and across snow-covered fields in the crisp light of a winters day, must be one of the most enigmatic sights in the British countryside. Unfortunately, such events are increasingly more uncertain as birds fail to occupy what appears to be typically suitable habitat.

The decline of the barn owl

Since 1932, when the national population was estimated at 12000 breeding pairs, barn owls have been in decline. There are now around 4000 pairs in the UK and the population remains vulnerable. Having examined over 900 barn owl records we estimate that there are now around 160 breeding pairs in Shropshire. In the county, large fields of grazing land still exists, surrounded by a mosaic of hedgerows with grassy margins which provide habitat for the small mammals on which barn owls depend. However, farmers and landowners are noting that barn owls are not seen quite so often as they used to be. Why then should the barn owl be in such trouble? The answer may partially lie in the gradual, but persistent loss of their traditional nest sites and habitat.

The barn owl's habitat

Adult barn owls are sedentary, establishing home ranges of around three square kilometres and hunt mainly within one kilometre of their nest site in the breeding season. Their preferred habitat is fields of permanent rank grassland or lightly grazed pasture, especially tussock grasses with a thick sward and deep litter layer to support field voles. On many farms nowadays, grassland of this type is often confined to linear features such as hedgerows, field margins, drainage ditches, the banks of rivers and streams and woodland edge. Intensively grazed pasture and arable crops is poor habitat. Intriguingly though, barn owls have successfully bred in sites with only a few hectares of rough grassland.

A pair of barn owls needs a large cavity for nesting and several others for roosting. Unfortunately, many nest sites have been lost as trees have decayed or farm buildings have been developed. Studies have shown that when a barn used by barn owls for nesting is lost through decay or to conversion, the owls do not simply move to an adjacent site but completely desert the immediate area and are lost. Loss of feeding habitat, road deaths and urbanisation has also taken their toll.

The work of the Shropshire Barn Owl Group

The Shropshire Barn Owl Group is a voluntary organisation which provides nestboxes for barn owls and promotes the conservation of their habitat across Shropshire. We now have 90 nestboxes in Shropshire, several of which are used for breeding or by roosting barn owls. It is fruitless putting nestboxes in any old site because if the habitat is not right, barn owls are unlikely to find enough food to breed successfully or even be enticed to stay in the first place. We therefore initially conduct field surveys which involves plodding around fields (with the owners permission), poking heads over hedgerows, driving along country lanes and scanning maps to identify areas of suitable barn owl habitat. Generally, we are constantly on the lookout for good barn owl habitat and increasingly farmers are contacting us to take a look at their land and to give advice.

Installing the boxes

Nestboxes are of two main types – modified tea chests for internal sites and large, 'A' shaped boxes which are fixed to the trunks of isolated trees. Where there are no suitable trees available then we will erect old power cable poles and fix the boxes to

them. Tea chests can usually be fixed to a beam quite speedily, but the heavier external boxes demand a little more effort. Two or more boxes might be installed on a site and a cost of around £40 tends to focus the mind a little and ensure that we are as sure as we can be that barn owls will be interested! The aim is that by providing a series of nestboxes on land that is interconnected by corridors of good barn owl habitat, dispersing young will be able to settle in the vicinity and create stable and viable breeding populations. Early results are encouraging. In one 'cold' site where barn owls have not been seen for many years, if at all, we have managed to attract roosting barn owls to a nestbox within six months.

How you can help the barn owl

Retaining existing grass or herbaceous margins or sowing new ones along hedgerows, field headlands, riverbanks and ditches provide ideal habitat for small rodents. Grassy strips should preferably be at least five metres in width, but even pulling a temporary fence line back a few metres from a hedge will help whilst the fence posts enable the owls to use the energy saving 'wait-and-see' hunting technique. Woodland plantations in the early stage of growth and permanent set-aside are also beneficial to barn owls and the current Countryside Stewardship schemes under DEFRA offer tremendous opportunities for attracting barn owls.

Knowing that there are farmers and other landowners across Shropshire who care for barn owls is reassuring. If you own land and would like to encourage barn owls then please contact John Lightfoot on 01691 623083 and we will arrange to take a look at the site. If you can help meet the cost of a nestbox – marvellous. Farms that already support roosting birds often make successful nest sites with the addition of a nestbox. Look for telltale signs such as streaks of white, chalky droppings on the beans of outbuildings or on hay bales and black, shiny, thumb-size pellets on the ground below.

By working closely with the farming community, the maintenance of current population levels should be feasible and, hopefully, in the long-term we can bring back one or two pairs of this graceful white owl to its previous haunts.

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