

Shropshire

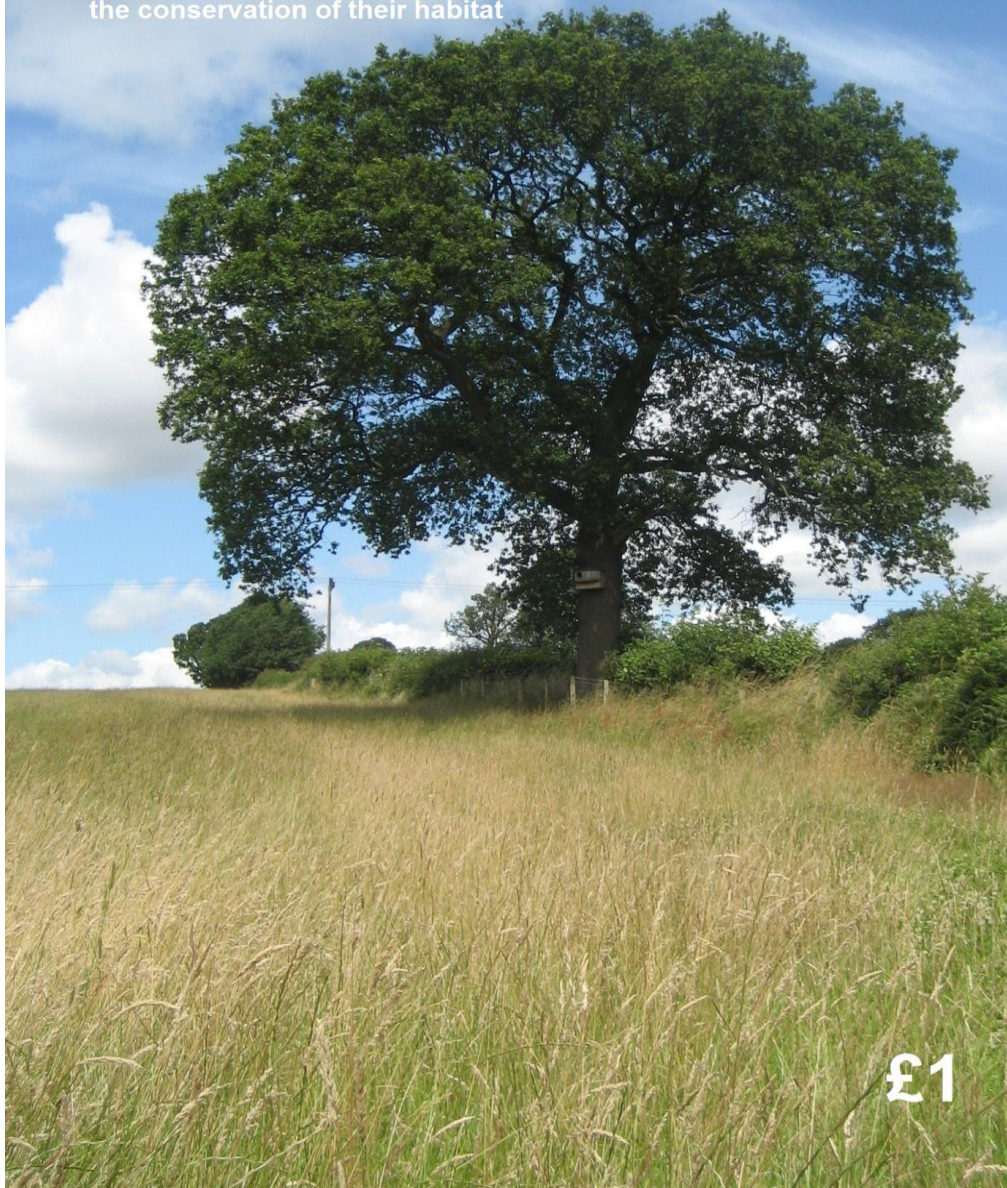
Barn Owl

Group



2011

Providing nestboxes for barn owls and promoting
the conservation of their habitat



£1

This report summarises the results and activities of the Shropshire Barn Owl Group (SBOG) for 2011. The SBOG is a voluntary group and has been working since 2002 to increase the breeding population of barn owls in Shropshire by providing nestboxes in areas of suitable habitat and working with farmers and other landowners to conserve their habitat.

What We Do

- Conduct site surveys and promote the conservation of barn owls and their habitat with farmers, landowners, statutory authorities and conservation organisations
- Operate a nestbox scheme for barn owls in Shropshire to replenish natural nest sites lost to decay and development
- Monitor nestboxes and natural sites for occupation by breeding and roosting barn owls on an annual basis under licence from Natural England
- Maintain a database of breeding sites, nestbox occupation and breeding success
- Act as a lead partner in the Shropshire Barn Owl Biodiversity Action Plan
- Give talks and practical demonstrations to groups and schools
- Provide advice and practical assistance to local authorities, developers and homeowners to mitigate disturbance to barn owls

SOME OF OUR ACHIEVEMENTS SO FAR

Over 300 nestboxes installed for barn owls in Shropshire

191 successful breeding attempts in nestboxes

569 young barn owls produced in nestboxes

221 young barn owls in natural sites

248 site surveys completed



The 2011 Breeding Season

The Nestboxes

Thirty-two nestboxes supported breeding pairs of barn owl in 2011 and five were occupied by roosting birds at some point in the year. Table 1 includes both successful and unsuccessful breeding attempts. The occupancy rate of 18% for breeding barn owls was marginally above the average occupancy rate of 15% and the overall nestbox occupancy rate of 22% by both breeding and roosting barn owls was below the average occupancy rate of 31%. The average yearly nestbox occupancy rate is greater for tree nestboxes, 32%, than building nestboxes, 30%, and pole nestboxes, 26%.

Table 1. Nestbox occupation by Barn Owls in 2011

Total No. nestboxes monitored	Tree				Building				Pole				% of nestboxes occupied by breeding pairs	% of nestboxes occupied by breeding and roosting birds
	No. Boxes	Breeding	Roosting	%	No. boxes	Breeding	Roosting	%	No. boxes	Breeding	Roosting	%		
170	118	25	2	22	46	6	3	19	6	1	1	33	18	22

Where they bred

The SBOG confirmed barn owls breeding in nestboxes monitored by the group at Attingham, Bagley, Catherton, Chirbury, Clive Wood, Crudgington, Ellerdine, Ellesmere (3 pairs), Gobowen, Kynnersley, Lyneal Lodge, Lyneal Wood (2), Marchamley (3), Millen Heath, Morton, Mose, Spoonley, Weston Lullingfields, Pickstock, Rednal, Tibberton, Tunstall, Whixall (3), Wilaston, Wollaston and Woore,

Breeding in natural nest sites monitored by SBOG occurred at Nant Mawr, Pen-y-Bryn, Priorslee and Wappenshall.

Breeding success

Table 2. Number of chicks produced according to type of nest site in 2011

Figures in brackets refer to number of broods

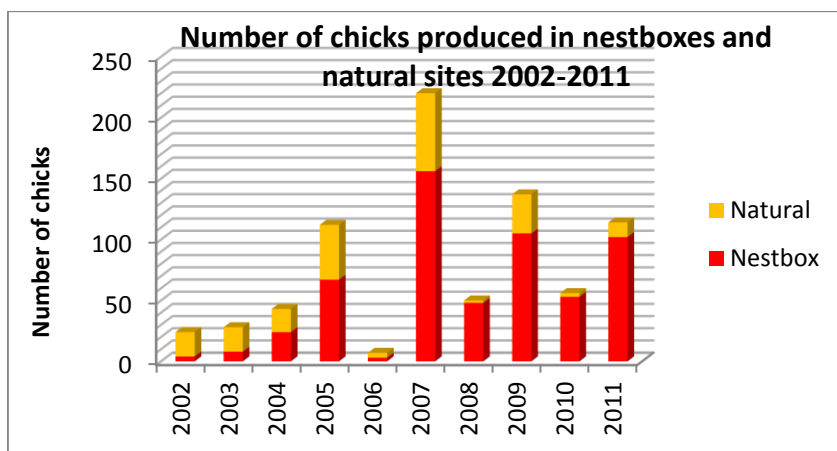
Tree nestbox		Building nestbox		Pole nestbox		Tree cavity natural		Building natural		Other natural		Total No. chicks	Mean No. chicks
No. chicks	Mean	No. chicks	Mean	No. chicks	Mean	No. chicks	Mean	No. chicks	Mean	No. chicks	Mean		
80 (25)	3.2	19 (6)	3.1	3 (1)	3	5 (2)	2.5	3 (1)	3	4 (1)	4	114	3.1

114 barn owl chicks were produced in sites monitored by SBOG in 2011. Table 2. Nestboxes produced 102 chicks and natural nest sites produced 12 chicks. The data is confined to those pairs successfully producing chicks. Broods ranged from 2 to 4 chicks, mean 3.1, and were slightly higher than the average for all years combined of 2.9.

Breeding summary 2002-2011

790 barn owl chicks have been produced in nest sites monitored by SBOG since 2002, 569 in nestboxes and 221 in natural sites. Internal nest sites, including both nestboxes and natural sites in buildings, have produced an average of 3.1 chicks in the last ten years and do appear to be marginally more productive than external sites, both tree nestboxes and natural cavities, which have produced 2.9 chicks. The mean number of chicks produced per successful brood in Shropshire for the ten years 2002-2011 is 2.9. Studies elsewhere suggest that a long-term average productivity of about 3.2 young per pair is required to maintain viable populations, so 2011's average of 3.1 chicks was almost on target.

Nestboxes are increasingly producing a greater proportion of chicks compared to natural sites as the number of nestboxes increase and pairs become firmly established at nestbox sites. A two-year cycle in breeding productivity, probably correlated with fluctuations in the field vole population, is also increasingly evident.



Chirbury Barn Owl Rescue

Heather Cummins

What started out as a day logging in a nearby field quickly turned into a rescue operation. A large oak tree had been damaged in recent winds and a branch had split from the main trunk leaving the inside of the hollow trunk exposed. My son peered down inside and spotted something moving. After closer inspection we could see it was three owl chicks. They were very deep down inside the tree trunk and had no protection from the elements so we knew we couldn't leave them as they were. The tree was also in danger of splitting right down the middle.



Even though we consider ourselves birdwatchers at this stage we weren't sure if they were Tawny or Barn Owl chicks. Anyway, the most important thing was to try and make them safe. This had turned very much into a family affair. The logging log forgotten my husband cut a large round from the fallen branch and we tried to fashion some shelter with the branches. We were not at all happy with the situation, but at a loss to know what else to do.

Back at home I checked on the net and phoned the Barn Owl Trust in Devon who confirmed that they were Barn Owls chicks. The very helpful gentleman asked if we could go back to the nest site and try to place a box or something like a cat carrying cage inside the trunk to offer the chicks some protection. We went back for another look, but there wasn't enough room inside for a box and as the chicks were so deep inside it was impossible for us to reach them. I again rang the Barn Owl Trust and said that we were worried about the chicks.

It was at this point that we were told about the Shropshire Barn Owl Group and that they would ask John Lightfoot of the group to phone us. We were so impressed with the advice and help that we received. Within half an hour of that conversation John was on the phone to us and we arranged to meet the next day. John and his wife arrived and we spent a delightful few hours with them installing a nestbox and weighing the chicks. It was wonderful!!!

That night we went back to make sure the parent birds had accepted thier new first class residence. We didn't have to wait for long and after a slight hesitation they were in and out of the nest box. I am happy to report that all three chicks were saved and well on the point of leaving the nest.

So a very happy ending thanks to the Barn Owl Trust and the Shropshire Barn Owl Group.

A Farmers Perspective

Paul Griffiths

Higher Kempley Farm, Willaston, Calverhall, Whitchurch

Eleven years ago I entered an agreement – through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. I knew this would give me the opportunity to put something back into my farm, the environment and to encourage more wildlife.

My family has been at this farm since 1959 for many of those years growing crops rearing livestock all in a fairly intensive way in order to survive in the climate then. I knew that some of these practices were not conducive to the environment – wildlife, birds, insects and mammals alike which troubled me. From a very early age I have had a great interest in wildlife, especially birds and had noticed that numbers were decreasing. I had not seen a barn owl on the farm or in surrounding areas for many years. I have always felt that there is something about the barn owl that makes it special to many people even if they have never seen one in real life.

I made a commitment to myself to halt the decline in bird populations on the area in my charge and see an increase. To clean out ponds to provide shallow wet areas and replant some natural species including rare ones wherever possible – to this end we have re-introduced black poplar on the farm.

With our new regime we have 6 metre grass margins, wild flower headlands around every field and have sited many nest boxes for barn owls thereby doing as much as we can to provide an ideal habitat for them and encourage them back to the farm. This has proved to be a successful strategy and they are back in very good numbers and we have seen young broods for the last three years. John Lightfoot ringed five owlets in 2011. How fantastic is that!!

Indeed with wild bird pollen and nectar crops on the farm maximizing those awkward corners, an 8 year programme to manage hedges 'gapping up' with 7 or 8 native species there has been a tenfold increase in wild birds and game birds alike especially wild grey partridge. Our involvement in an RSPB Farmer Alliance annual count over the last 3 years has confirmed this.

Crop yields have not suffered as a result of all the environmental work and have in fact increased in recent years. The resident bee hives situated in small wooded coppices established in 1994 have no doubt helped improve our yields. This only confirms my belief that we all – farmers, land managers and custodians of the country side have an obligation to look after it and make sure we leave it in better condition than when we took



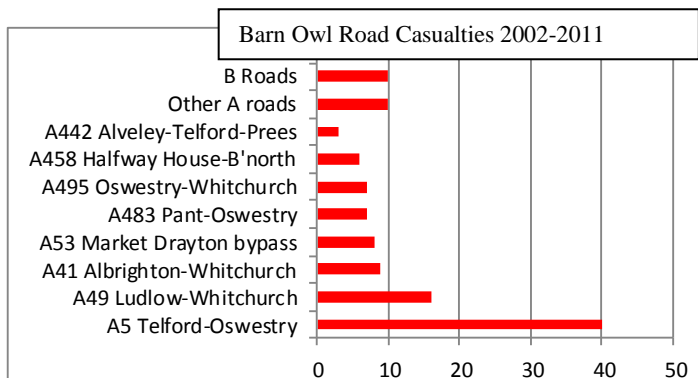
it on. I realise that not everyone can have the same passion for their environment and natural surroundings BUT that doesn't stop everyone doing a bit in their own way. At least that way the barn owls that have come back to our farm will have a greater chance of survival and will be around to bring pleasure to even more people.

The support of fantastic volunteers such as the 'Lightfoot family' has enabled me to progress my work for barn owls more rapidly. I know they are passionate about them which has been infective and their belief has shown that bird numbers can in fact be reversed from an annual decrease to an increase. All this while continuing to maintain a high level of arable output alongside their sterling work ensuring the provision of suitable feeding and nesting habitats and targeted control of predators.

Here's hoping to another successful barn owl breeding season in 2012!!

Barn Owl Road Casualties

Five road casualties were recorded from roads in Shropshire in 2011. 91% of casualties occur on 'A' roads with relatively few casualties on 'B' roads. The A5 is the most serious threat to barn owls, especially the dual-carriageway section through Shrewsbury,



accounting for 40 casualties and 34 % of all deaths in the last ten years. 66% of the road victims relate to the winter period October to March, coinciding with juvenile dispersal and adults extending their hunting ranges. SBOG's policy is not to install nestboxes within one kilometre of major roads in order to minimise the risk of barn owls coming into contact with vehicles.

Number of monthly barn owl road casualties 2002-2011



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 thanks to the following for their support during the year: Shropshire Ornithological Society, Shropshire County Council, The Environment Agency, Upper Onny Wildlife Group. Thank you also to the many farmers and landowners across Shropshire who provide invaluable support and allow us to install nestboxes on their land (for reasons of site confidentiality we cannot disclose who or where they are). For financial support this year we are most grateful to the William Dean Trust and the Muller Community Trust of Muller Dairy (UK) Ltd. A special thank you to Paul and Elaine Griffiths for help with the Muller award.

Several 'silent' helpers have provided invaluable support during the year, either willingly or by default! They are Richard Camp, Will Macken, Alan Russon. We are grateful to Kingsley Press for printing the report and to SWT for meeting the printing costs. Active members of SBOG in 2011 were John Lightfoot, Wendy Lightfoot, Glenn Bishton, Victoria Fennell, Richard Fennell and Lauren Fennell.

How you can help

- **Contact us if you would like to encourage barn owls to breed. Barn owls require large fields of permanent, 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**
- **Contact us to arrange a site survey if you have created grassy margins or headlands under DEFRA's Entry Level or Higher Level Stewardships scheme**
- **SBOG can construct, install and monitor nestboxes for a nominal cost of £70**
- **Retain large, old trees to provide nest and roost sites**
- **Retain old barns and stock shelters, or where they are to be developed, consider incorporating a loft space for breeding barn owls**
- **Let us know when natural nest sites are threatened by development or decay so that we can work with you to protect the barn owls.**
- **Report sightings of barn owls**

If you feel that the work that we do is worthwhile and would like to support our efforts please consider making a donation to the Shropshire Barn Owl Group. For more information visit www.shropshirebarnowlgroup.org.uk

Contacts

John Lightfoot. Tel. 01939 261141. Mobile 07967 878147. john.lightfoot10@btinternet.com
Glenn Bishton Tel. 01952 433005. Mobile 07944 733277. glenn@bishton7.plus.com

The barn owl is on Schedule 1 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