

Telford & Wrekin Local Biodiversity Action Plan

Barn owl *Tyto alba*

The sight of a barn owl floating silently on the still air of a summers evening or flitting over hedgerows and across snow-covered fields in the broad daylight of a winters day must be one of the most enigmatic and memorable encounters in the British countryside. Unfortunately, such observations are fast becoming ever more uncertain as birds fail to occupy what appears to be typically suitable habitat.

The loss of traditional nest sites in barns, and old trees, changing farm practices, the use of ever increasingly toxic rodenticides and increased road casualties have all taken their toll on the barn owl. In 1932 there were 12000 breeding pairs in England and Wales, by the 1980's, there were 4500.

Barn owls prefer warm, low lying river valleys and are most productive in areas with rough grassland or grass margins along hedgerows or riverbanks. Most birds nest in buildings, but many will use cavities in trees and these sites will probably become increasingly more valuable as more barns are converted into homes. Clutches are usually complete by late April and three young are the norm. Adults remain faithful to the breeding area after breeding but utilise roosting holes separate from the nest site. Juveniles have dispersed from the natal area by December, which probably accounts for winter observations of barn owls away from traditional breeding sites.

1. Objectives

- 1.1 Maintain existing population of barn owl in Telford and Wrekin by prevention of further habitat loss or deterioration.
- 1.2 Increase the breeding population by a process of habitat management and initiating a nestbox scheme.
- 1.3 Prevent the loss of existing nest sites in barns and other buildings by close scrutiny of planning applications.
- 1.4 Promote communication, education and awareness of the status and habitat requirements of the barn owl.

2. Targets

- 2.1 Ascertain the breeding population of barn owls in Telford and Wrekin by 2005.
- 2.2 Identify areas of suitable habitat which can be enhanced by the provision of nestboxes and by agri-environmental schemes by 2005.
- 2.3 Install 20 tree-site nestboxes for breeding and roosting purposes by 2010.
- 2.4 Attract a minimum of 2 pairs of barn owl to sites presently unoccupied by 2010.

3. Current status

3.1 UK population trend and conservation listing

The UK population was estimated at 4000 breeding pairs during 1995-1997 in a British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and Hawk and Owl Trust (HOT) survey. This does not suggest any further major decline on the previous estimate of 4500 pairs in 1985-1987, but the barn owl remains vulnerable. Breeding productivity has tended to improve since the 1950's. The species is not monitored annually.

The barn owl is amber-listed (medium conservation concern) in the 'Birds of Conservation Concern' (BOCC) report and listed as of Conservation Concern in the UK Biodiversity programme.

3.2 Status in Shropshire

The Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) categorise barn owl as a common resident which is reported from all parts of the county, except the southern hills. The majority of records originate from central and northern Shropshire. The breeding population was estimated at 140 pairs in 1992.

3.3 Status and key habitat features in Telford and Wrekin

SOS records indicate that the core population of barn owls in Telford and Wrekin is on farmland around the Weald Moors, with a small number of pairs in the Newport and Wrekin Fringe area. Birds are occasionally recorded in the developed area of Telford, including Halesfield, Stafford Park and Hadley and probably relate to wintering sites adopted by juveniles dispersing from their natal area. The breeding population is probably in the region of 12 pairs.

A bird survey by the Severn Gorge Countryside Trust (SGCT) in the Severn Gorge in 1999/2000 did not record barn owl.

4. Current factors affecting the species

Causes of decline are various and there is little specific information by which to rank them.

- 4.1 Habitat loss is considered to be the main cause since the 1950's. In particular, short-term rotation of grasslands does not allow the main barn owl prey of voles and shrews to establish sufficient numbers. Decline in prey items, particularly field voles, due to loss of hedgerows and rough grassland may have driven the historical decline.
- 4.2 Additional agricultural related factors include: loss of rough grassland margins along hedgerows and the woodland edge; loss of hedgerows and ditches and associated grass margins; barns and cattle sheds now more hygienic and supporting fewer rodents; canalisation and mowing of riverbanks and ditches; conversion of farm buildings for habitations and the loss of old hedgerow trees is reducing the supply of nest sites; increased road traffic and consequent casualties; secondary poisoning from increasingly potent rodenticides; severe winters; dispersal of birds increasingly difficult as birds become more isolated.
- 4.3 Climate change, particularly an increase in UK temperature and milder winters, may assist survival and a range expansion northwards in the future.

5. Current action

5.1 Policy and protection

- 5.1.1 The barn owl is protected under the EU Birds Directive 1979 and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.
- 5.1.2 Planning Policy Guideline note 9 (PPG9) on Nature Conservation affords protection to barn owls when a local planning authority is considering a development proposal.

5.2 Research, survey and habitat management

- 5.2.1 The Barn Owl Trust (BOT) actively conserves the barn owl and its environment in Devon and Cornwall, offers education and advice on barn owl conservation and has an active membership across the UK.
- 5.2.2 The Shropshire Barn Owl Group (SBOG) conducts fieldwork in order to determine areas of suitable barn owl habitat, install and monitor nestboxes, promote the conservation of their habitat with farmers and other landowners and liaises with other conservation and government bodies.
- 5.2.3 HOT has developed a long-term conservation strategy for barn owl, involving consolidation of existing strongholds and concurrently expanding populations from these core areas through the reinstatement of a prey-enhanced habitat network.
- 5.2.4 HOT operates and monitors a national nestbox scheme, targeted at specific regions.
- 5.2.5 The SOS collates records of barn owl in Shropshire.
- 5.2.6 HOT researches road traffic deaths and assesses the value of reintroduction programmes.
- 5.2.7 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) operates Countryside Stewardship (CS) which offers habitat initiatives of value to the barn owl.

6. Action plan for Telford and Wrekin

6.1 Policy and protection

- 6.1.1 To ensure Structure and Local Plans and other strategy documents contain appropriate policies to protect the barn owl and the habitat it requires.
- 6.1.2 Ensure that planning applications for buildings are scrutinised for potential disturbance to barn owl.

6.2. Land and habitat management

- 6.2.1 Identify an area that currently supports no barn owls but contains potential habitat which could be enhanced through CS to provide a core population of barn owl and from which birds could disperse to populate surrounding areas. Potential sites include the Wenlock Ancient Farmland, the Wrekin Hills, the Wrekin Fringe and the Severn Gorge.
- 6.2.2 Install 20 nestboxes on land supporting suitable foraging habitat but presently devoid of barn owls. Identify an appropriate sponsor of the scheme.
- 6.2.3 Promote CS with farmers and land managers within the key areas with particular emphasis on creating grass field margins, conservation headlands and hay meadows.

6.3 Research, survey and monitoring

- 6.3.1 Establish a database of sites occupied by barn owl by a programme of ongoing survey and liaison with SBOG, SOS, farmers, landowners and other interested bodies.
- 6.3.2 Consider a mailshot to all farmers within the key area to determine if barn owls are present and the feasibility of installing a nestbox.
- 6.3.3 Monitor nestboxes and sites where management initiatives have been completed in order to determine success rate and population levels.
- 6.3.4 Establish links with BOT and HOT to remain informed of developments in barn owl conservation and research.

6.4 Advisory

- 6.4.1 Disseminate information on management for barn owl to advisors, farmers and other land managers through training and workshops. Utilise educational material available from BOT and HOT.

7. Complementary plans

Telford and Wrekin farmland seed-eating birds SAP
Telford and Wrekin kestrel SAP
Telford and Wrekin SAP
Telford and Wrekin field margins HAP
Telford and Wrekin unimproved grassland HAP
Telford and Wrekin hedgerows HAP
Telford and Wrekin veteran trees and parkland HAP
Shropshire field margins HAP
Shropshire hedgerows HAP

8. Review

Progress in achieving targets should be reviewed after two and five years following the publication of this challenge document, followed by a ten-year review.

Glenn Bishton
John Lightfoot
2002
Shropshire Barn Owl Group