

## Barn Owls and agri-environment schemes A farmers perspective

*This article kindly produced by Steve Wild of Bull Farm Kenley shows gives a farmers perspective of barn owl conservation and the value of DEFRA's Entry Level Scheme. 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 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 DEFFRA 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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