



# Vale Barn Owl Conservation

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Contact us: 01949-844319

valebarnowls@hotmail.co.uk

The group was formed in 2008 to promote barn owl conservation. The area covered is from Normanton near Bottesford to Grimston and Saxelbye near Melton Mowbray, bordered on the east by the A607 Grantham to Melton road and on the west by the border with Nottinghamshire. The group provides nest boxes, habitat advice and monitors breeding success. In 2008 25 nest boxes were erected.

Thanks go to those farmers, gamekeepers and other individuals that erected and monitored boxes prior to the start of this project and for the enthusiastic support from the farmers and landowners we received in 2008.

**Funding; In 2008 we received a £300 grant from the MARS Community Grant Scheme, other donations from the public totalled £250. It is not yet known what grant funding will be available in 2009. If you wish to find out more about local barn owl conservation or make a donation towards the cost of the project please contact us.**

## Breeding cycle of the barn owl

The breeding cycle starts in late winter when males and females find each other by their screeching call. When paired the birds will tour their territory to inspect possible nest sites before settling on a preferred location. This could be a previously used nest site, regular roost or a site specifically chosen for breeding. Barn owls may choose a site within their territory where high numbers of small mammals are nearby. As spring approaches pairs will spend more time near the intended nest site. During this courtship period the male will spend more time hunting and will present additional food items to his mate or leave them in the nest cavity. The female will spend less time hunting and her weight will need to increase from 350g to 425g to reach breeding condition. In periods of food shortage barn owls may not attempt to breed. Mating normally follows the male presenting a food item. The amount of food presented has an effect on egg fertility and the amount of eggs laid. The male is present at the nest site prior to egg laying and until the clutch is complete, leaving only to hunt.

The first egg is normally laid in early April, if food is plentiful this could be earlier or even as late as July or August for first year birds.

Eggs are laid at 2 to 3 day intervals and the female incubates (warms) from the time the first egg is laid so when hatched the first chick could be 3 weeks old when the last egg hatches.

The female will rely completely on the male for food from the time of egg laying until the first chick is 3 weeks old, a period of some 9 weeks. If the male should not be able to provide sufficient food the eggs may be abandoned or, if the male dies during this time, females have been known to sit tight and die of starvation on the eggs. When the female leaves the nest for the first time she will want to take a water bath, it is thought this is the only time a barn owl bathes in water. This is the time barn owls may drown in cattle troughs.

Whilst the female has been sitting for some 9 weeks the male will be roosting elsewhere, which could be up to a mile or more away and will only visit the nest to bring food. The male will normally hunt within 1.25 miles of the nest site.

By this time small mammals should have completed their first breeding cycle thus increasing the owls food supply. When the eldest chick is 4 to 5 weeks old the female will also leave the nest to roost elsewhere and will return to bring food. At 5 weeks a young barn owl (owlet) is half grown and will often weigh more than the adults. In times of food shortage it is not uncommon for a large owlet to eat one or more of its smaller weaker brothers or sisters. This is a survival habit designed to ensure at least one of the young fledges.

Whilst most young birds stay in a nest and only beg for food, owlets from 3 weeks old will 'play' like kittens, by 5 weeks, given space in the nest, the owlets will run and jump and pounce. When hungry they call for food with a hissing sound.



Barn owl young take longer to leave the nest than most birds, typically 8 weeks before the first flight. They will practice flying near the nest site and return to roost at the nest site. The adult birds will feed the young for up to 11 weeks before reducing the food supply. The young normally leave the nest area by 14 weeks but sometimes can stay within the adults' territory for several months. Normally by the end of November the young have moved to find a new territory.

In a year of food plenty such as 2007 at least 10% of breeding barn owls will have a second clutch of eggs. The female will normally lay at a second nest site nearby, but records show this could be up to 1.5 miles away. When this happens the male has to feed the growing first brood and feed the female warming the second clutch of eggs.

The success of breeding in natural nest sites is adversely affected by the lack of available tree cavities and old buildings, sites exposed to rain and lack of space in cavities for the young to develop prior to fledging. One of the objectives of the Vale Barn Owl Conservation Group is to provide an adequate number of nest boxes so barn owls have sufficient nesting and roosting sites.

More interesting information can be found by visiting the user friendly web site [www.barnowltrust.org](http://www.barnowltrust.org)





This superb photo of a Leicestershire barn owl hunting at dusk is reproduced with the kind permission of Danny Green from Loughborough. Danny is a professional wildlife photographer and in 2007 he was the overall winner of the International Wild Bird Photographer of the Year, beating 7,000 entrants from 36 countries. He also won the Birds in Britain Category. This photo and other superb photos of barn owls, other birds and mammals can be seen at [www.dannygreenphotography.com](http://www.dannygreenphotography.com) Danny's photos can be purchased in either high quality prints or as greeting cards.

## Six inches if you can spare it please!

The diet of the barn owl has changed over the last 100 years. Farms have become tidier with more rodent proof grain and stock feed storage. Their diet has changed from a high proportion of rats and mice around farms to a mixed diet where the short tailed field vole and shrew are very important. Field voles live in long tussocky grass and their main food is grass shoots. Shrews also scurry about in long grass. An analysis of 16 recent barn owl pellets from a local roost showed prey as field vole, bank vole, shrew, pygmy shrew, wood mice, one house mouse and one rat.

The DEFRA stewardship scheme has benefited barn owls with the introduction of two to six metre grass strips around arable fields. Arable farmers joining the scheme would benefit barn owls.

If it is possible when cutting these strips to raise the blade to six inches this would benefit barn owls as field voles can live in six inches of grass. September or October has been found to be the most beneficial time for barn owls for cutting grass to 6 inches as this helps ensure adequate food over the winter and early spring when barn owls need to get into breeding condition. Also, when haymaking, if farmers consider it practical and affordable, leaving a corner or a strip near a hedge uncut, or cut to 6 inches would be of benefit, even if livestock are returned quickly to the field.

If you are a landowner can you help the barn owl by contributing to the six inches of grass appeal?



### Advertisement feature

## EradiBait rat & mouse killer - a safer bait

Unlike conventional poison bait rodenticides, EradiBait contains no dangerous chemicals, relying for its effectiveness on the unique digestive system of a rodent. EradiBait causes the rodent to stop drinking, leading to dehydration, coma and death. EradiBait is harmless to humans and any animal other than a rodent, making it ideal for use in areas where there is a risk of accidental or secondary poisoning, for example around children, pets and wildlife, which is why it is recommended by **The Barn Owl Trust**.

Approved as a pesticide by The Health & Safety Executive, EradiBait is available at country stores or can be bought on line at [www.eradibait.com](http://www.eradibait.com)



### SOME BARN OWL FACTS

***Prey numbers control the population of barn owls. Barn owls have little control over the prey population.***

***Unlike other birds barn owls are unable to tolerate being wet so require a dry location to roost and dry weather for hunting.***

***A number of rainy nights can cause starvation and can be disastrous during the breeding season.***

***The barn owl's superb hearing is its main asset when hunting prey.***

***Whilst birds make a noise as the wings move through the air owls fly silently.***

***The barn owls superb hearing is complemented by its ability to fly and see in low light - a time when small mammals may be more active.***

***It is thought that nationally 70% of barn owls now breed in nest boxes.***

***Barn owls cannot completely digest their meals. Bones and fur that cannot be digested are regurgitated in a form that is known as a pellet.***

***Nationally the short tailed field vole has been found to be the main prey species.***

***Road accidents are the main cause of mortality. Whilst the barn owl is undoubtedly a superb hunter it generally flies low and does not have 'road sense'. If you see a barn owl near a road whilst driving please slow down if safe to do so to reduce the risk of collision with the car.***

