

# Barn Owl

## Local Biodiversity Action Plan

### Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*)

#### Associated Habitat Action Plans:

- Cereal Field Margins
- Roadside Verges
- Unimproved Grassland



### Ecology

#### Appearance

Barn owls have pure white underparts with buff coloured back and wings and a heart shaped face. Adult barn owls are around 34cm long with a wingspan of 90cm. The female barn owls weigh an average of 362g, which is 62g more than the males that usually weigh in at about 300g.

#### Habitat

Barn owls nest in quiet barns, outbuildings and hollows in trees. Their preferred habitat is farmland and other open areas with scattered trees, such as Cereal field margins and Unimproved grassland.

#### Food

Barn owls mainly feed on small mammals such as mice, voles and shrews, however they have been known to take other birds.

#### Predators

Barn owls are known to have cannibalistic tendencies. Food shortages can cause large healthy chicks to kill and eat weaker siblings. Chicks can also be vulnerable to predation from cats and foxes.



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### Life Style

- Barn owls are nocturnal and are most easily seen at dusk and dawn. However occasionally barn owls can be seen hunting during the day.
- They make a variety of shrieks, hisses and snores they do not hoot like the Tawny owl.
- Barn owls usually live alone or in pairs and they tend to mate for life.
- Females lay clutches of up to 7 eggs from April to early May. The males help to feed the young and the chicks fly after 9 to 12 weeks.
- They have been known to breed twice a year.

### Current status

In the early part of this century (1910) Coward & Oldham described the barn owl as being a common but 'curiously local' resident (Guest *et al* 1992). In 1932 Blaker conducted the first national barn owl survey, which revealed a population of 239 pairs in Cheshire. Over the next 50 years the barn owl declined all over Britain, primarily due to agricultural intensification. By the time the next national survey was conducted by the Hawk and Owl Trust in 1982-5 the population in England and Wales had crashed by 69%. In Cheshire the decline was even more severe, down 85% and leaving just 35 pairs (Shawyer 1998). The results of Project Barn Owl, a joint Hawk & Owl/BTO survey conducted between 1996-1998 (Toms *et al* 2000 and 2001) indicated that the decline had slowed down but that regional results were variable. Conservation efforts in some areas were beginning to show positive results.

However, in Cheshire, the 1998 population was confirmed as only 7 pairs by the Cheshire Barn Owl Project (covering the whole Cheshire region) and this rose to 10 pairs in 1999. Conservation efforts intensified during this period as several Barn Owl groups set up, liaising with landowners to improve habitat, erecting new breeding boxes (on poles or in outbuildings/barns) and monitoring breeding success by ringing both adults and young birds. By 2001, a total of 29 breeding pairs were monitored and 53 young were confirmed at the 21 nest sites that were accessible (2.52 young per pair). Since then the number of breeding pairs of barn owls has been steadily rising and between 2004-2006, barn owls were confirmed as a breeding species in 142 tetrads in Cheshire with the majority of locations being in the west and central parts of the county (Norman, 2008).

The barn owl is protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), which makes it illegal to disturb a barn owl at the nest. It is also listed under Schedule 9 of the Act, which means that a licence is required to release captive-bred birds into the wild. It is also listed in the EC Birds Directive, Appendix ii of the Bern Convention, which requires member states to take special measures to conserve listed species; because of this, the barn owl is on the Amber List of Birds of Conservation Concern 3 (2009).



## Threats

- Loss of rough grassland hunting habitat as a result of agricultural intensification and urbanisation
- Loss of suitable nest and roost sites, through felling of mature trees and conversion of farm buildings
- Declining small mammal populations (a nationwide problem)
- Increased volume of speed of road traffic, which accounts for the majority of deaths

## How are we helping to conserve the barn owl in the Cheshire region?

- Local Barn Owl Group members collect sightings, monitor nest sites, conduct surveys, erect nest boxes and visit farmers.

## Objectives, targets and actions

The objectives, targets and actions to help conserve the Barn Owl in the Cheshire region can be found on the [Biodiversity Action reporting System \(BARS\)](#) along with full details of our progress so far.

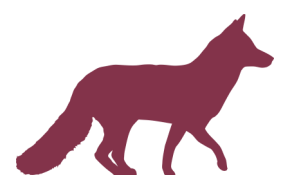
## How to find out more about barn owls

The Local Barn Owl Action Groups websites can be seen at [www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk](http://www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk) and [www.wirralbarnowltrust.org/](http://www.wirralbarnowltrust.org/)

The Wirral barn owl webcam site, live from Wirral Country Park can be seen at [www.wirral-abc.gov.uk/barnowls/](http://www.wirral-abc.gov.uk/barnowls/)

## How can you get involved?

Join your local Barn Owl Group. Click on [www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk](http://www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk) to find out who your local group is.



### References and Glossary

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<http://www.barnowltrust.org.uk/infopage.html?Id=1>

