

# Survey Techniques

LEAFLET No 8

Reg. Charity No 299 835

***This leaflet tells you about local Barn Owl surveys and search procedure, helps you to spot evidence of occupation and provides some background on Barn Owls and the law.***

## Why do a Barn Owl survey?

As with any rare species, it is important to find out what is happening to Barn Owls in order to conserve them. For example, when a potential nest site is the subject of a planning application it is important to know if birds are present. National or county bird surveys are often based on checking all potential sites in sample areas.

If conservation measures are to be undertaken it is only possible to assess their effect if the area is surveyed both before and after the changes.

## Barn Owls and the law

Almost all wild birds are protected but the Barn Owl has additional protection against disturbance whilst at or near its nest (Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981). A survey which includes a visit to a probable breeding site during the breeding season should only be carried out by a licence holder (contact Natural England, Scottish Natural Heritage or the Countryside Council for Wales as appropriate for details).

The normal breeding season is March to August, although Barn Owls in Britain have been recorded nesting in every month of the year. It is worth noting that the majority of occupied sites are not nest sites but simply roosting sites.

## Places worth checking

Most Barn Owl sites are buildings such as old barns, derelict houses, ruins and churches. Agricultural buildings are the most commonly used. Only about half of all old barns have a potential nest place but the majority are suitable for roosting. Modern barns are generally unsuitable but may be used especially if a nestbox is provided. Nationally about a third of Barn Owl nest sites are in trees but a big dry cavity is required so generally only old trees are suitable. The birds (and signs of their occupation) are sometimes well hidden in a hollow trunk or a large hollow branch. Occasionally other types of sites are used such as occupied dwellings or barn conversions where provision for owls has been incorporated.

## What to look for

When searching for signs of occupation by Barn Owls, droppings, pellets and feathers are likely to be most apparent. However, be aware that it is possible for Barn Owls to use and even nest in a site without leaving very obvious signs.

**Droppings:** Barn Owl droppings are white (sometimes with a little black) and very wet when produced. A dropping on hay or straw may be about the size of a coin but on a hard surface it may be a star shaped "splat" the size of a small hand. A dry dropping is white and chalky and can be found below perching or roosting places.

**Pellets:** Barn Owls often swallow their prey whole and regurgitate the hair and bone later in the form of a pellet. Barn Owl pellets vary from the size of a thumbnail to that of a whole thumb (see page 3 for a selection of shapes and sizes). They are moist and black when fresh. In dry locations they become hard in about a week, dark grey in about six months and begin to crumble after about twelve months. However, pellet drying and decomposition rates vary a great deal. Pellets produced by Little or Tawny Owls will often have visible insect remains - look for small black/blue or brown shiny bits.

**Feathers:** Barn Owls moult between March and October but most moulting occurs whilst the birds are nesting. If you find lots of Barn Owl feathers it's a good indication that the site was occupied during the breeding season.

**Nests:** Barn Owls do not build a nest and they do not carry nesting material. They need a level or concave surface on which to lay their clutch of 4-7 matt white eggs. Typical locations are level wall tops, gaps between bales, ceilings, empty tanks, wall cavities, dove-cots, nestboxes, tree hollows etc.

Old nests contain a layer of compact pellet debris, normally with some whole pellets lying around. Occasionally bits of white eggshell can be seen. An occupied or recently vacated nest has an ammonia type smell. If you discover a probable occupied nest cavity but the nest itself is out of sight, check for the smell and listen for a defensive hiss (it sounds like a gas leak). If you are not licenced for nest inspection leave the site quickly and use external observations at dusk to confirm your findings.

## Safety

Old buildings, trees, farms, and ladders are all potentially dangerous. If you are working alone always tell someone where you are going and when you will return. Carry a mobile phone if you have one. Before using a ladder always check to ensure it is in good condition. Wear a hard hat. When up the ladder do not try to reach too far. Be especially careful in old barns. Before walking on an old upper storey floor, always look at it from the underside first using a good torch.

## Searching a typical building

Before entering, look for any holes in the outside walls which a Barn Owl could use (75mm or 3" wide minimum). Check these for droppings - are there any white streaks down the wall?

If you are with somebody, one of you should stand outside the building where you will get a good view of any departing owl. Barn Owls appear white underneath and buff above.

In a two-storey building the owl(s) will normally reside in the upper part. Enter quietly and look up; check the beams for white streaks with your torch and look for a roosting owl. Barn Owls are good at hiding - even if one is present, it is very likely that you won't see it. Check the floor, roof beams, tops of walls and any holes in the walls for signs - white droppings, black/grey pellets or white/buff feathers. A quick procedure is to stand under a roof beam with your back against the wall, then work across the floor searching the area below the beam. When you reach the opposite wall, repeat the procedure below the next beam and so on. Check below all suitable perching places. When searching for nest debris check all the ledges and cavities using a ladder and torch. Be especially careful checking enclosed cavities or nestboxes as an owl might suddenly fly out at the last moment. Although Barn Owls are not aggressive it could give you a shock.

Barn Owls which are flushed from their regular daytime roost sites do not normally go very far and settle again soon. However, if you know that a site has only recently become occupied, or if the weather is severe or very wet, you should avoid flushing birds out if at all possible - delay the survey.

For an average two-storey barn, this search takes only 10 minutes but does allow a reasonable degree of

confidence in the results. Old buildings with many holes and inaccessible sections can take much longer. In buildings where hay or straw bales are stored, it is necessary to search the top of the stack and check any holes between the bales wherever possible. In cases where a thorough search is impractical, due perhaps to the dangerous condition of the building, other methods of assessment may be necessary, such as external observation at dusk.

## Other survey methods

Apart from physically searching sites, large scale surveys can include enquiries to data holders such as county biodiversity record centres, media appeals to encourage people to report sites, the placing of posters appealing for information, and even the use of lure tapes. However, none of these methods will gather such reliable data as an intensive search. The Barn Owl Trust has found a combination of posters, farmer interviews and follow-up searches produces reasonable results. Since 1985, we have accumulated an extensive database of Barn Owl records for Devon and Cornwall.

Attached you will find a poster to photocopy for use in a local Barn Owl survey. Posters for use in Devon or Cornwall should carry the Trust's telephone number. Posters for use outside Devon and Cornwall have a blank space for the insertion of your own telephone number.

You may like to send us details of any current Barn Owl sites you find (with dates, map references, etc.). All Barn Owl site locations are kept confidential.

## Further information

*Barn Owls On Site - A Guide for Developers and Planners* is a colour booklet available from the Barn Owl Trust (£2.50 inc. p&p). It includes:

- detailed information on search procedure and the identification of signs;
- colour illustrations of pellets produced by Barn Owl, Tawny Owl, Little Owl, Kestrel and Jackdaw;
- a photographic guide to the age determination of pellets;
- pictures of droppings, feathers, nests and eggs.

Please also see pages 31 and 32 of *Barn Owls and Rural Planning Applications*, available as a pdf download from: [www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/barnowl-rpa\\_tcm6-12652.pdf](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/barnowl-rpa_tcm6-12652.pdf)



## A local contact

Most able-bodied people armed with this information and some basic equipment can complete a reasonable survey. However, should you require assistance or someone with specialist local knowledge, please contact the Trust. We will try to put you in touch with someone in your county.

## Free identification service

Dry samples of pellets, nest debris, feathers, or eggshell can be sent to the Trust by post for identification. If you have a sample which is very smelly then it is not from a Barn Owl so please don't send it to us.

**GOOD LUCK WITH YOUR SURVEY!**

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latest revision 2010

The Barn Owl Trust is a registered charity dedicated to the conservation of the Barn Owl and its environment. You can become a **Friend of the Barn Owl Trust** and support our work by making a regular donation.

**Friends** receive our biannual magazine Feedback, our Annual Report and an enamel pin badge.

The Trust provides a wide range of free leaflets on Barn Owl related matters. For details of these and further information about the Trust and its work, please write including a large SAE to:

Barn Owl Trust  
Waterleat  
Ashburton  
Devon  
TQ13 7HU

Tel: 01364 653026

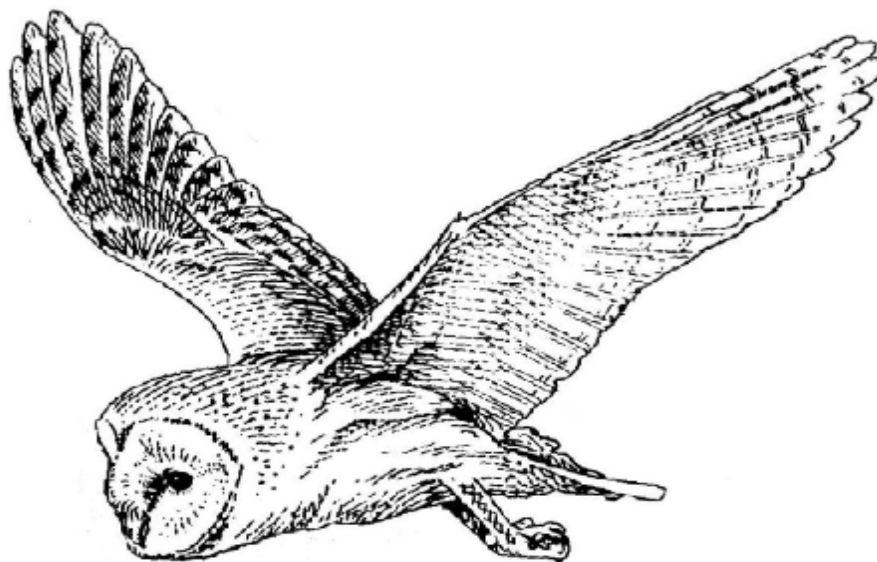
Email: [info@barnowltrust.org.uk](mailto:info@barnowltrust.org.uk)

Web: [www.barnowltrust.org.uk](http://www.barnowltrust.org.uk)

***A selection of actual size Barn Owl pellets showing a variation in size and shape***



# WANTED!



## Have you seen a wild Barn Owl?

When and where did you last see one?

PLEASE CALL

Barn Owls are now rare and we are making great efforts to ensure their survival. Your information is important to us. We need to know the past and present distribution of Barn Owls in this area



**BARN OWLS ARE WHITE  
THEY FLY AT DUSK AND  
DAWN AND SCREECH**

Barn Owl Trust, Waterleat, Ashburton, Devon, TQ13 7HU

Telephone: 01364 653026

Web: [www.barnowltrust.org.uk](http://www.barnowltrust.org.uk) - Email: [info@barnowltrust.org.uk](mailto:info@barnowltrust.org.uk)

## Restoring the Balance

We've lived side-by-side with Barn Owls for centuries. But in modern times wild Barn Owls have become increasingly rare - and the reasons are all man-made. The Barn Owl is a symbol of our relationship with the countryside: the decline of this beautiful bird reflects our attitude towards the environment. No species can prosper in isolation - not even human beings. All things are connected and if we lived in balance with nature then Barn Owls, and so much other wildlife, could thrive.

### How you can help

You can help to conserve the Barn Owl by **Becoming a Friend** of the Trust and making an annual or monthly donation to support our work. If you are a UK tax payer and complete a simple **Gift Aid** declaration the Trust can reclaim the tax paid on your donation and significantly increase the value of your gift at no extra cost to you. Standing order and Gift Aid forms are provided below. Please consider paying by **Standing Order** as this greatly reduces our administration time and costs.

#### BECOMING A FRIEND

UK Friends: Individual £20; Family (same address) £25

Overseas Friends: Individual £25 (sterling); Family (same address) £30 (sterling)

Owlets: UK £20; Overseas £25. Owlets are JuniorFriends. They receive a personal ID card, Feedback and goody bag. (If children are under 16, please state ages. One or more children from the same family at one address can be Owlets.)

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime telephone no \_\_\_\_\_ Email address \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to become a Friend of the Trust and receive my Friend's pack - I enclose £ \_\_\_\_\_ \* (see above)

I am pleased to enclose a donation of £ \_\_\_\_\_ \*

\*UK taxpayers please complete Gift Aid declaration below.

Sorry, donations of under £5 are not acknowledged without an SAE.

The contact details you submit on this form will be held by the Barn Owl Trust on a secure computer system and may be used by the Trust in pursuit of its aims. Please let us know if you object to this.

#### GIFT AID DECLARATION

*If you are a UK tax payer completing this Gift Aid form will enable the Trust to reclaim the tax paid on your donation, thereby increasing the value of your gift at no extra cost to yourself.*

Full name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

I want the Barn Owl Trust to treat all donations I make on or after the date of this declaration as Gift Aid donations until I notify you otherwise

My signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Note: Please remember to tell us if you no longer pay an amount of income or capital gains tax equal to the tax we reclaim on your donations.  
Please contact our office if you have any queries.

#### STANDING ORDER FORM

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

Please pay £ \_\_\_\_\_ on the first day of each **month\*/year\*** (\* delete one) starting in the month of \_\_\_\_\_

and a like sum on the same date each **month\*/year\*** until further notice to the account of

**the Barn Owl Trust** (a/c no. 01027812) at Lloyds TSB Bank (sort code 30-98-69) 31 Fore Street, Totnes, Devon, TQ9 5HH

My signature \_\_\_\_\_ Account Number \_\_\_\_\_ Sort Code \_\_\_\_\_

To the manager \_\_\_\_\_ Bank \_\_\_\_\_

Bank Address \_\_\_\_\_ Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

*THIS STANDING ORDER REPLACES ANY EXISTING STANDING ORDERS FROM THIS ACCOUNT TO THE BARN OWL TRUST*

Please fill in and sign the appropriate parts of this form and post it to:

**Barn Owl Trust, Waterleat, Ashburton, Devon, TQ13 7HU**

If you'd like to receive information by post, please tick the boxes below and enclose a large stamped addressed envelope:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sample of <i>Feedback</i> (our bi-annual newsletter) | <input type="checkbox"/> Fund-raising for the Barn Owl Trust                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leaving a Legacy (full details on our website)       | <input type="checkbox"/> Barn Owl Trust publications (full details on our website)         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Corporate sponsorship                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Barn Owl Trust sales goods (full details on our website)          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Barn Owl adoption (full details on our website)      | <input type="checkbox"/> Consultancy/Site Assessment Service (full details on our website) |