

Barn Owl

(*Tyto alba alba*)



STATUS & ECOLOGY

A steady decline in barn owl numbers over the century has accelerated to such a degree in the last 20 years that the current UK population is estimated to be only 4,000 breeding pairs, from a 1932 estimate of over 12,000 pairs. Scotland's barn owl numbers have reflected this decline. No more than 5 pairs are thought to remain in the countryside around Edinburgh.

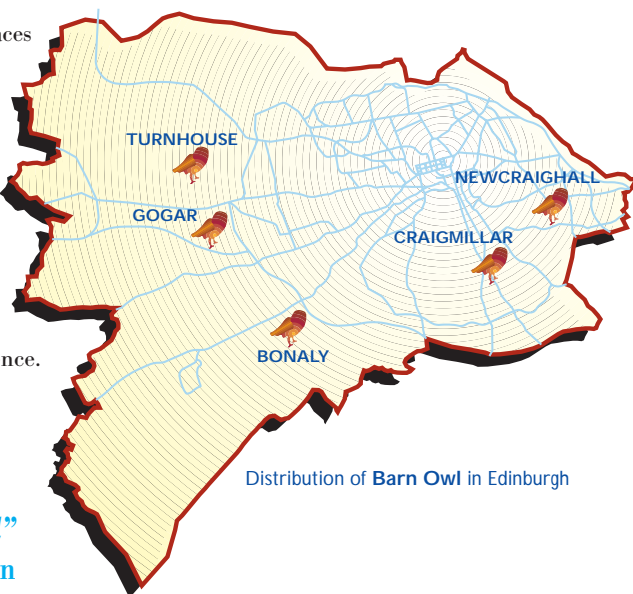
Scottish barn owls live almost entirely within grasslands and forests. Their diet consists almost wholly of small mammals associated with these habitats, such as voles, shrews and mice. The barn owl's hunting range in the breeding season is about 1km from the nest/roost site, but extends to 5km during the winter months. About 90% of prey is taken within a 1km radius. Areas of moderately long grassland are especially important for foraging, as is the provision of woodland belts for shelter and hunting perches.

Suitable roosting and nesting sites can be holes in trees, rock faces and derelict buildings. Nest sites must be dry and warm to prevent the fatal chilling of owlets in wet weather. Competitors for nest sites are jackdaws, stock doves, kestrels, and tawny owls. A major factor influencing barn owl population levels is the number of voles in any particular year, as vole population levels are cyclical.

The barn owl is protected under Schedule 1 and Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. It is an offence to injure, kill or capture the bird, to disturb nesting birds, to take eggs, and release captive owls into the wild without a licence.

*"The muffled hunter moves like smoke, like wind,
scarcely apprehended, barely glimpsed and gone,
like a grey thought fanning the margins of my mind"*

Joseph Payne Brennan



FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OR DECLINE

Impacts

Habitat loss has had the most significant impact on barn owl numbers. Agricultural change, particularly the 'improvement' of rough pasture, the draining of damp grasslands, an increase in cereal cropping and autumn sowing, a decline in hay making, the loss of edge habitats such as hedgerows, the extensive use of herbicides and the use of vermin proof grain storage, has limited the availability of food. The loss of grassland habitats to industrialisation, road building and house building has worsened this situation around urban areas. Also of concern are owl deaths from road traffic and pesticide poisoning, as well as the loss of nest sites due to forestry activities, building improvements and the felling of veteran trees.

Threats

Most of these impacts remain relevant. Although agricultural policy is increasingly seeking environmental improvements on farms, there remains a degree of uncertainty regarding both this and farm economics. The development of greenfield and redundant land also continues apace in and around the capital, and with this comes new road infrastructure. Of particular concern to local barn owl numbers are the developments associated with the Edinburgh south-east wedge, the Gyle business and retail parks, and the new superstores at Newcraighall. Building conversion is also increasingly economically viable in a time of continued property price rises.



CURRENT ACTION

The barn owl is identified by the UK Biodiversity Group as a 'Species of Conservation Concern', but no UK Action Plan is to be produced. However, the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group are already advising local farmers of the measures needed to protect and increase the species. Pest control firms are currently advised to take into account the risk to fauna, including barn owls, in exercising their roles. Increasingly, those rodenticides less toxic to birds are used, dead rodents are quickly removed, and humane traps are used where appropriate. Amongst other local organisations, East of Scotland Water adhere to this rodent control policy.

ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES & TARGETS

Objectives

To arrest and then reverse the barn owl population decline in Edinburgh.

Targets

To double the number of barn owls in Edinburgh by maximising barn owl breeding opportunities.

Actions

Confirm by Spring 2000, and then monitor annually, core barn owl breeding sites in Edinburgh.
(Actioned by: Scottish Ornithologists' Club, Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group & Edinburgh Green Belt Trust)

Identify and survey, by Autumn 2000, adjacent land which, given appropriate habitat enhancement, would allow for the emigration of surplus owls.
(Actioned by: Scottish Ornithologists' Club, Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds & Scottish Wildlife Trust)

Produce, by Spring 2001, management proposals for these areas to promote barn owl use. Encourage landowners to undertake, with conservation assistance, appropriate habitat enhancement works and erect artificial nest boxes from this date.
(Actioned by: Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group, Edinburgh Green Belt Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Scottish Wildlife Trust, City of Edinburgh Council City Development Department & East of Scotland Water)

Produce a local plan policy, by Summer 2000, to encourage the construction of artificial barn owl nest boxes in proposed barn, steading and other appropriate agricultural or rural building developments or conversions.
(Actioned by: City of Edinburgh Council City Development Department)

Key Contacts

East of Scotland Water
Scottish Ornithologists' Club
City of Edinburgh Council (City Development)
Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
Scottish Wildlife Trust
Edinburgh Green Belt Trust

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CHAMPIONS

