

SPECIES ACTION PLAN FOR THE BARN OWL

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Current Status

The barn owl is found in almost every continent and is one of the most widely distributed land birds in the world. It nests and roosts in tree cavities, old and derelict farm buildings and barns, and feeds mainly on small mammals such as voles, shrews and mice. Barn owls hunt mainly at night, and may be seen over areas of rough grassland, field margins, hedgerows and derelict land, as well as along water courses, woodland edges and newly planted woodland. The presence of barn owls is a good indicator of the health of biodiversity in lowland areas, as the range of habitats needed by the species is also vital for a wide variety of other animals and plants.

The barn owl was quite a common sight in the 19th Century, but the UK population has fallen by an estimated 90% since 1830. The decline has been particularly sharp in the last half of this century, mainly due to agricultural intensification. Recent national population figures (1996) put numbers at 3,750 pairs for England and Wales, and 650 pairs for Scotland, putting the overall national population at 10,000 birds.

Nottinghamshire's first census of barn owls was in 1932 by George Blaker, who estimated the total number of breeding pairs as 210. A national survey carried out by the Hawk and Owl Trust in 1994 puts the number at an estimated 95 pairs, a drop of 55%. This decline is believed to be continuing.

Threats

The main factors currently affecting barn owls in Nottinghamshire are:

- Loss of habitats such as rough grassland and hedgerows to development and agricultural intensification, with a consequent decline in prey species populations.
- Lack of long grass in field margins and roadside verges as a habitat for small mammals.
- A lack of old trees for nesting and roosting sites.
- Demolition or conversion of old agricultural buildings. The design of modern buildings often makes them unsuitable nest sites.

- Poisoning by rodenticides and insecticides, which get passed up the food chain to barn owls. Of particular concern are 'second generation' poisons used to control warfarin resistant rodents.
- Road deaths. The lack of long grass means that barn owls often feed along roadside verges, making them vulnerable. Large numbers of owls are killed every year in the UK.
- Disturbance to nesting and roosting sites (often unintentionally) by people.
- Hard winters in recent years have led to many barn owls dying of starvation.

Current Initiatives - Examples

- Many private landowners manage areas of actual or potential barn owl habitat, and have a vital part to play in the conservation of the species.
- The barn owl is protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and is a priority species under European law. It is an offence to kill or injure a barn owl, or disturb it while it is building or using a nest.
- It is illegal to release a barn owl into the wild without a license, as released birds are often unable to survive. Official release schemes have had some success.
- New areas of suitable habitat will be created under several habitat action plans, including those for lowland heathland, grassland and oak-birch woodland.
- The Rushcliffe Barn Owl Project aims to increase the number of barn owls in the district by working with land managers to provide nest boxes and restore or create suitable habitats.
- Rufford Country Park are undertaking a habitat study and barn owl project.
- The Crown Estates have a project to install barn owl boxes on their land.
- The creation of field margins and the maintenance of grasslands are promoted through the Countryside Stewardship Grant Scheme.
- The Environment Agency and the Hawk and Owl Trust are to erect and monitor 9 owl boxes in the Lower Trent catchment.
- Nottinghamshire County Council and the Forestry Commission, funded by British Coal, are restoring 1000 ha of former colliery spoil tip to woodland and other habitats suitable for barn owls.
- The Barn Owl Trust is a national organisation which aims to conserve the species and its environment. It provides a free information and advice service.

Targets

- Determine the current status and distribution of the barn owl in Nottinghamshire by 2005 and formulate a target for expansion.
- Maintain the current distribution and abundance of the barn owl in Nottinghamshire.
- Create nesting sites and maintain and enhance suitable feeding habitats with the aim of increasing barn owl population levels in the County.

Proposed Action

Policy and Legislation

1) Ensure that barn owls and their habitats are protected and promoted through appropriate regional and local planning policy instruments.

Action: Government Office East Midlands, Local Authorities (LAs).

2) Promote awareness of the legal protection afforded to barn owls among land owners, planning officers and contractors.

Action: LAs, English Nature (EN), Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust (NWT).

3) Ensure that the needs of barn owls are taken into account in local and national incentive schemes.

Action: EN, LAs, Forestry Commission (FC), Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF).

Site Safeguard and Management

4) When assessing applications for the conversion of old or derelict agricultural buildings, ensure that they will not result in damage to barn owl nest and roost sites and adjacent habitats. Local Authorities must consult English Nature if there is reason to believe that owls may be present.

Action: LAs, NWT, RSPB, EN.

5) Encourage the use of barn owl boxes both in new buildings and the renovation of existing structures.

Action: NWT, EN, RSPB, LAs.

6) Seek to include the needs of barn owls in the management of SSSIs and other wildlife sites.

Action: EN, LAs, NWT, RSPB.

7) Encourage the favourable management of land adjacent to known nest sites, and promote the restoration or re-creation of suitable feeding habitats and linear features. Encourage the installation of nest boxes in appropriate locations.

Action: EA, LAs, RSPB, NWT, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV), Agriculture and Development Advisory Service (ADAS), Sherwood Forest Trust (SFT).

8) Ensure that the restoration of colliery sites under the British Coal deal incorporates barn owl boxes and raptor perches in suitable locations wherever appropriate.

Action: FC, Nottinghamshire County Council (NCC).

Species Management and Protection

9) Build on the success of the Rushcliffe Barn Owl Project by setting up similar projects in other districts, or one for the County as a whole. Encourage barn owl box sponsorship, and work with land managers on schemes for habitat creation and management.

Action: NWT, LAs, FWAG, RSPB.

10) Raise awareness among land managers of the need to reduce the use of rodenticides by carefully targeted use.

Action: Biodiversity Action Group (BAG).

Advisory

11) Ensure the provision of advice to relevant organisations and land managers on the conservation problems of the species.

Action: EN, FWAG, LAs, SFT, ADAS, RSPB, Farming and Rural Conservation Agency (FRCA).

Future Research and Monitoring

12) Continue to monitor existing breeding pairs, and contribute records to the NBGRC.

Action: NWT, EN, FWAG, British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), Notts Birdwatchers (NB), Lound Bird Club, Ringing Groups.

13) Carry out a survey to determine the current status and distribution of the barn owl in Nottinghamshire.

Action: NWT, NB, BTO, RSPB, Nottinghamshire Biological and Geological Records Centre (NBGRC).

14) Establish a monitoring procedure to compare achievements to habitat and species targets and revise the Action Plan as necessary.

Action: BAG.

Communications and Publicity

15) Raise awareness of the plight of the barn owl and use it to promote the value of hedgerow trees, field margins, hay meadows and other habitats to the general public. Aim to maximise public involvement in surveys and nest box schemes wherever appropriate.

Action: BAG, SFT.

16) Use the barn owl as a flagship species to promote the conservation of field margins, hedgerows and other farmland habitats to land owners and managers.

Action: EN, FWAG, LAs, SFT, NWT, RSPB, ADAS, National Farmers Union, Country Landowners Association.

What You Can Do

- Report sightings of barn owls (alive or dead) to the Biological Records Centre at Wollaton Hall.
- Encourage the managers of your local park, churchyard or road verge to set aside areas where grass can be left long, as shelter for the small mammals on which barn owls feed.
- Put up a barn owl box in a suitable location. Advice is available from the Rushcliffe Barn Owl Project (if you live in Rushcliffe) or the RSPB.