

Barn owl

Barn owls (*Tyto alba*) are very pale and may be seen at dawn and dusk



Most often seen as a ghostly white form quartering a field at dusk. Seen close to it has a heart-shaped face and dark eyes. Its plumage is golden-buff and grey above, and white below.

The male is slightly smaller than the female and has pure white breast feathers, while the female has golden brown spots on the chest.

It is largely nocturnal but can be seen at dusk and dawn; sometimes hunts during the day in winter and during the breeding season when feeding young.

Length: 33–35cm; wingspan: 85–93cm

Status in UK

4,000 pairs, stable, possibly increasing; AMBER listed; resident

Population trends

The barn owl was the most common owl in Britain during the 18th and 19th centuries. The population began to decline in the latter half of the 1800s, possibly associated with increased persecution and a series of hard winters. They continued to decrease into the 20th century, and by the first census in 1932 there were estimated to be some 12,000 pairs in England and Wales.

Intensification of agriculture and the use of persistent pesticides caused further losses. The Hawk and Owl Trust survey in the mid-1980s found that the population in England and Wales was down to less than 3,800 pairs, with an additional 650 in Scotland. A combination of the provision of nestboxes and diversification of agricultural land through agri-environment schemes has at least stabilised the population.

Habitat and distribution

The barn owl is found on mixed farmland with hedges, copses and areas of rough grassland.

This owl occurs throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland; north of the border it is absent from central, north-east and the far north of Scotland and the outer Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland.

Breeding

Barn owls often nest inside farm buildings, tree cavities and sometimes in holes in rock faces. Nestboxes installed by the Hawk and Owl Trust have been successful in areas where there is suitable hunting habitat. Nationally up to 80 per cent of pairs are now thought to breed in boxes. Breeding is very dependent on prey numbers; double brooding is not uncommon and three broods occur when voles are very plentiful.

Feeding



The short-tailed field vole (left) is the preferred prey species, caught in areas of rough grassland, and can form up to 85 per cent of its diet. Barn owls will also hunt hedgerows and other habitats where they take wood mouse, bank vole, shrews and brown rat. Small birds are also occasional prey.