

Little owl

Little owls (*Athene noctua*) are active during daylight



The smallest owl in Britain, it is often seen during the day perched on a post, telegraph pole or exposed branch. It has a broad rounded head and short tail, which gives it a dumpy appearance. Grey-brown, speckled with white above and it has dense, brown streaks on white beneath. Its bright yellow eyes with prominent white eyebrows give it a frowning expression. When agitated it bobs and moves from side to side. It flies with a series of fast wingbeats and looping glides.

Length: 21-23cm; wingspan: 54-58cm

Status in UK

5,800-11,600 pairs declining; introduced; resident

Population trends

The little owl was an occasional visitor to Britain before the mid-19th century, when a series of introductions occurred. Attempts in Yorkshire and Hampshire failed, but those in Kent in the 1870s and in Northamptonshire in the 1880s led to little owls establishing themselves in England, filling the vacant niche for a small nocturnal predator in agricultural landscapes.

It spread rapidly in the early part of the 20th century and by 1925 had colonised much of England south of Yorkshire and south Wales. By 1960, although it had spread north to southern Scotland and north Wales, the population increase had slowed. From then on numbers have declined as it was affected by cold winters in the '60s and subsequently by intensification of agriculture. Since the mid-1980s little owls appear to have declined by at least a third, especially in the South-west.

Habitat and distribution

This owl is mainly found in farmland, around farmsteads and villages.

Occurs throughout England, Wales and southeast Scotland, but populations are very patchy in southwest and northeast England and southwest and central Wales.

Breeding

Little owls nest in holes in trees, farm buildings and sometimes holes in the ground such as rabbit burrows. They readily take to nestboxes, especially those with a tunnel entrance.

Feeding

Invertebrates, such as beetles, earwigs and earthworms, and small mammals form the majority of the little owl's diet. Small birds are taken mainly in the breeding season.