

Long-eared owl

The long-eared owl (*Asio otus*) is a very secretive bird that is often overlooked



The long-eared owl is smaller and slimmer than the tawny owl, especially when roosting, and has longer narrower wings. It has long tufts on the top of its head that look like ears, but these are not visible in flight or when it is relaxed. It has a well defined rusty-buff facial disc and orange eyes.

The upper parts are streaked grey with brownish-buff, making the bird well camouflaged when roosting against the trunk of a tree. In flight this owl appears more uniform with more fine streaks and barring than the short-eared owl. In winter they gather in communal roosts.

Length: 33-37cm; wingspan: 90-100cm.

Status in UK

2,000 pairs, probably declining; GREEN listed; resident and passage/winter visitor from Scandinavia.

Population trends

The long-eared owl was scarce, though probably under recorded, in southern England and Wales in the early part of the 19th century. Numbers increased in the second half of the century; this appears to coincide with the decline in tawny owls through persecution and the spread of conifer plantings. Always widespread in most of Scotland, apart from the extreme north and west, the species also benefited here from the spread of plantation forestry increasing in both their numbers and range in the late 1800s.

The population declined again in the 20th century in southern England and Wales. It remained more stable in Scotland, where the spread of tawny owls was slower, and in Ireland, where tawnies are absent, which suggests that competition with the larger owl may have been implicated. The decline has continued, though because of its shy nature it is under-recorded and has been the subject of a Hawk and Owl Trust survey in recent years.

Habitat and distribution

Long-eared owls are mainly found in conifer woodland on the edge of lowland heaths. They also occur in copses and thick hedges and belts of trees in open farmland and around rural settlements.

This species is widespread all year round in suitable habitats in the north, east and midlands of England, north Wales and southern Scotland. It also breeds further north in Scotland as a summer visitor. It is scarce and localised in south-west Britain.

Breeding

Long-eared owls breed mainly in abandoned crows' nests. They prefer those in pines but also use other conifers and deciduous trees. They will nest in baskets put up in suitable locations.

Feeding

This owl feeds mainly on field voles, other small rodents and shrews. In Britain it takes more birds than elsewhere in its range – principally house sparrows caught at their communal roosts in winter.