

Tawny owl

Tawny owls (*Strix aluco*) are the owls most often heard calling during the night.



Britain's most common owl, though more people know its toowhit, twowoo call than have ever seen one. Brown on the back, with a paler streaked underside, the tawny owl has dark eyes within a rusty facial disk. In flight it is dumpy with short broad wings and a short tail which helps it to manoeuvre through the trees when hunting in its woodland habitat.

Tawny owls are happy to live close to people in cities and towns, as well as in the countryside.

Length: 37-39cm; wingspan: 94-104cm

Status in UK

19,400 pairs, declining; GREEN listed; resident

Population trends

Tawny owls were severely persecuted in the second half of the 19th century considerably reducing their population. In fact long-eared owls were considered more common in the north of England and barn owls in parts of the south at this time.

A recovery began in the 20th century with more enlightened attitudes to the species and numbers seem to have stabilised by the 1950s. Numbers then declined, possibly linked to persistent agricultural chemicals, but had recovered by the 1970s. However a steady decline appears to have started in the mid-1980s, which is still continuing. This is most marked in Scotland and south-west England.

Habitat and distribution

The tawny owl is principally a woodland bird, but also occurs in farmland with plenty of trees and overgrown hedges. It is often found in urban parks and suburban gardens with mature trees.

It is recorded throughout England, Wales and Scotland but does not occur in Ireland or most of the islands surrounding the UK.

Breeding

Tawny owls nest in holes in trees and buildings; but will sometimes use crows' nests and squirrel dreys. They will take to nestboxes, though less readily than the barn owl.

Feeding

Tawny owls mainly feed on small mammals; in woodland bank vole, wood mouse, and shrews are most common, while in farmland field voles are more often caught. Invertebrates can also be a significant part of the diet, especially earthworms and beetles. Birds are also taken, especially in summer, when nestlings and fledglings are available. They usually hunt from a perch, dropping down on their prey.