

Barn Owl Conservation: Numbers, Status and How to Help

A free factsheet on the UK Barn Owl population

QUICK FACTS

UK conservation status: Green list, since 2015

Estimated UK pairs, mid 1990s survey: about 4,000

Legal protection: Schedule 1, Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981

Biggest causes of death: starvation, cold, wet weather and roads

A species that has recovered

In 1932 there were thought to be around 12,000 pairs of Barn Owls in England and Wales. Numbers then fell for decades, driven by pesticides, the loss of hunting grounds and harsh winters. A large survey in the mid 1990s found only about 4,000 pairs left in the UK.

Since then, thousands of nest boxes, strips of rough grassland and a great deal of hard work by volunteers and conservation groups have helped the species recover. In 2015, the Barn Owl was moved from the Amber list of conservation concern to the Green list, reflecting real improvement, though numbers still rise and fall with the vole cycle and the weather.

Fully protected by law

Barn Owls are listed on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. That makes it an offence to kill, injure or take one, to damage an active nest, or to disturb a Barn Owl at or near a nest containing eggs or young. Only licensed people may inspect an active nest.

What threatens them most

Life is short for most wild Barn Owls. Only around one in four young owls survives its first year, though adults do much better, with roughly two in three surviving each year they live. The main dangers are starvation, cold and wet weather, roads, poisoned rodents, drowning in deep water troughs, and falls from nests with low entrances.

Deaths come in two main waves each year: the biggest in autumn, as young birds disperse and find their own territory, and a second wave in January and February, when food is scarce and the weather is at its worst.

How anyone can help

- **Leave a strip of rough grass** at least four to six metres wide along a field edge, hedge or ditch, to give voles, shrews and mice somewhere to live.
- **Add a few fence posts** about two metres high, which give a Barn Owl somewhere to hunt from.
- **Avoid rat and mouse poison** which can pass up the food chain from rodent to owl.
- **Fit a ramp to water troughs** so anything that falls in can climb back out.
- **Slow down** especially on rural roads at dusk, when owls are most active.

DID YOU KNOW?

Nobody has done an equally large, reliable survey of UK Barn Owl numbers since the mid 1990s, so today's population is still something of an educated estimate rather than an exact count.

A free factsheet from BarnOwl.live, live Barn Owl, Tawny Owl and badger cameras from the Peak District.

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