

Barn Owl Life Cycle: Egg to Fledging

A free factsheet on how a Barn Owl grows up

QUICK FACTS

Clutch size: usually 4 to 6 white eggs

Incubation: about 30 to 32 days per egg

Time in the nest: roughly 8 to 10 weeks

Full independence: at least four and a half months from first courtship

Laying the eggs

A Barn Owl does not build a proper nest. The female lays her eggs straight onto whatever is already there, often old pellet debris, straw or hay. Most eggs are laid in April or May, though the exact timing depends on food and weather.

She lays four to six white eggs, two to three days apart, and starts sitting on them as soon as the very first egg is laid. That means the eggs hatch in the same order, spaced two to three days apart, so one owlet always has a head start on the next.

Thirty days of incubation

Incubation takes about 30 to 32 days per egg. The female does all of the sitting, while the male does all of the hunting, bringing food to the nest for her to eat. Because the female sits for a month and the chicks then stay in the nest for more than eight weeks, the male can be the only food provider for over two months in total.

Hatching

An owlet hatches using a tiny hard bump on the tip of its bill called an egg tooth, which it uses to chip through the shell in a process called pipping. It emerges almost bald and pink, but within a day it is covered in soft white down.

Week by week

- **Week 1:** Mostly blind and helpless, fed tiny strips of food torn up by the female.
- **Week 3:** A thicker second coat of down grows in, and the female no longer has to brood them constantly.
- **Week 4:** Down is thick and fluffy, slowly turning into feathers.
- **Week 6:** Lots of wing flapping, to shed the last down, practise flying and show dominance at feeding time.
- **Week 8:** Owlets look much more like their parents, often sitting on the ledge outside the nest at night waiting for food.
- **Week 10:** Ready to fledge and take their first flights.

Leaving home

Most young Barn Owls leave the area where they hatched between twelve and sixteen weeks old, usually in late summer or autumn. Most settle within about ten kilometres of the nest. Nobody teaches them to hunt. Their instincts take over, and the following year they start the whole cycle again themselves.

DID YOU KNOW?

Because eggs hatch several days apart, a single nest can hold owlets of very different sizes at the same time, from a bald, pink hatchling to an almost fully feathered sibling.

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

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