

What Do Barn Owls Eat?

A free factsheet on diet, hunting and pellets

QUICK FACTS

Favourite food: the field vole

Average meal: 20 to 30 grams, about a third of a day's food

Daily food needed in winter: about 75 grams, roughly three voles

Typical pellet size: 4 to 6 centimetres long

What is on the menu

Thousands of Barn Owl pellets from across Britain have been collected and picked apart, and the results are clear. Nearly half of all prey eaten is the field vole. About one in five is a common shrew, and about one in seven is a wood mouse. Between them, those three make up around four out of every five meals.

The rest of the diet is made up of pygmy shrews, bank voles, harvest mice, and small numbers of house mice, brown rats, small birds and frogs. When the owlets are growing, small fledgling birds and young rats turn up more often, and on hungry nights even the odd frog.

Why the vole is the perfect meal

- **The right size.** it gives the owl around a third of its daily energy needs in one go.
- **Easy to eat.** small enough to swallow whole, which wastes no time or energy.
- **Water included.** a Barn Owl gets its water from its food, so a juicy vole is a meal and a drink together.

What a pellet is

Swallowing prey whole means the owl also swallows fur and small bones it cannot digest. A muscular part of the stomach called the gizzard squeezes these into a tidy lump called a pellet, which the owl coughs back up, usually once a day.

Fresh pellets are black, smooth and glossy. As they dry, they stay dark and fairly firm, with small flecks of white and grey where bone and fur show through.

What pellets are used for

- **Finding a roost.** A pile of pellets and white droppings under a beam or perch is one of the surest signs that an owl is roosting there.
- **Nest bedding.** Before laying eggs, a female often breaks up old pellets and scatters them across the nest floor with her talons, making a warm, dry bed.
- **What scientists learn.** Pulling a pellet apart reveals skulls and jaw bones that show exactly what the owl has been eating. Wear gloves for fresh ones, and always wash your hands afterwards.

Helping Barn Owls find food

Voles, shrews and mice all love long, undisturbed grass, and where the rodents go, the owls follow. Leaving a strip of rough grassland uncut along a field edge, hedge or ditch is one of the single best things anyone can do for Barn Owls.

DID YOU KNOW?

Barn Owls almost never eat bats. In one major national survey, only about three in every ten thousand prey items were bats, however often people assume otherwise.

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