

# Buriton's help for owls

Gemma Barnett from Buriton Estates has been leading local work with experts from the Hawk Conservancy near Andover, the Selbourne Landscape Partnership, the South Downs National Park, Petersfield Men's Shed and other local bird lovers.

Together they have mapped out where owl boxes existed in the parish, put up more where needed and carried out a baseline survey on Gemma's land to record any future changes.

There are now boxes in every two acres in the parish - the recommended number.

"We have a variety of boxes which should suit kestrels, barn owls and tawnys," Gemma said.

"These birds can all live side by side so you could have all three species in each two acres in theory."

Gemma says more boxes could be put up in Weston and beyond and anyone interested there should contact her on [gemmabarnett@googlemail.com](mailto:gemmabarnett@googlemail.com) for information and help.

She would also like to hear from anyone with a box on their land.

She'd like the WhatThreeWords location of the box, and the landowner's phone number so experts can monitor the boxes in the right season.

"I've started to gather this information but it would be great to have it for all the boxes in our parish," Gemma said.

Buriton Environmental Association also hosted a fascinating talk in the village hall

in October by Kim Boog, from the Barn Owl Project Hampshire and Bird of Prey Hospital.

The talk was aimed at raising awareness of owls, their lives, habits and threats.

Kim also brought two beautiful guest stars - a barn owl and tawny owl which she has rescued but is unable to release back into the wild.

Here are some fascinating facts about barn owls:

## **Beautiful, brutal barn owls**

A silent assassin glides effortlessly over the rough grass, head down, fixed in a laser-like focus for the slightest movement of prey.

Suddenly, in the glowering dusk, it hovers for a moment, and then plunges, talons first into the field - its supper located, locked onto and quickly despatched.

Welcome to the world of a hunting barn owl - nature at its most beautiful but brutal best.

It's a sight we might be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of in our parish, if we are at the right place at the right time.

Like so many birds in the UK, barn owls are under pressure. But if we know more about them, their needs and their habits, there are things we can do to help.

## **What does a barn owl look like?**

If you are lucky enough to see them perched on a branch or a post, you'll recognise their beautiful heart-shaped face, buff coloured back and wings with pure

white underneath.

They have large eyes fixed in sockets which is why they have to swivel their heads to see in different directions.

If they are on the wing, you'll probably see them in hunting mode - silently flying backwards and forwards over a field, three to four metres above the grass, head facing down.

They are usually 33-35 cm in length, with a wingspan of about 80-95cm.

### **When and where are you most likely to see them?**

They prefer open, rough tussocky grassland where their prey is abundant. They also hunt along field margins and ditches, woodland edges, heaths, marshes and sometimes road verges.

They tend to hunt at dawn and dusk, often preferring the early evening when there is usually little wind. They can also hunt during the day.

Their feathers have a soft, fuzzy edge which helps their soundless flight.

### **What does their call sound like?**

They have a high pitched screeching call - which is why they are sometimes called screech owls.

### **What, and how do they hunt?**

Their main food is voles but they will also eat mice, shrews and rats.

They fly over grassland with their face acting like a satellite dish, channelling sounds into their amazing hearing. They can hear a mouse's heartbeat from several feet away. They also have incredible eyesight.

Both senses help them hunt at night.

Once they lock on to prey, they hover and then drop, lethal talons first, killing and eating it quickly on the ground. They swallow it whole and what they can't digest, like bones and fur, is coughed back up in a pellet.

They sometimes hunt from a perch like a field post. During the breeding season they have a two-square kilometre hunt site.

### **Where do they nest?**

Barn owls don't build a nest. Instead they find holes in trees, ledges in old farm buildings or human made nest boxes. They are generally not fussy about the shape they inhabit as long as it is safe and dry.

Their top site is a box in an old farm building - double the protection.

They use old owl pellets as a base to keep their eggs safe. They usually lay four to seven eggs which hatch in the order they are laid.

### **How long do barn owls live?**

In the perfect environment, they could live 15 to 20 years. In the wild, the average is four years. They tend to mate for life.

According to the RSPB, there are about 4000 breeding pairs in the UK but monitoring of nocturnal birds is difficult!

### **Do they have predators?**

Barn owls are generally known as an apex predator, at the top of the food chain...but buzzards, goshawks and foxes will predate them. And cats will go for an owl fallen from a tree.



### **Why are barn owls under pressure?**

Loss of old farm buildings, especially barns, for nesting, reduced food supply due to habitat loss, road deaths and secondary poisoning when they eat rodents which have eaten toxic bait set by humans.

### **What can we do to help them?**

Use non-toxic methods - such as traps or exclusion - to control rodents.

Get involved in nest box or survey projects with approved groups.

Avoid felling trees which might provide nesting sites, especially those with cavities.

Avoid disturbing nesting sites during the breeding season - usually March to September although it can start earlier and finish later.

You can watch nest sites from a safe distance that doesn't disturb the birds.

### **And finally....**

It is a myth that owls can turn their heads 360 degrees. But they can rotate their heads an impressive 270 degrees due to special physical adaptations.

And a group of owls is called a Parliament - due, according to legend, to their long association with wisdom, thoughtfulness, silent gaze and mysterious, often silent nature...

Buriton Environmental Association