

Owls in the UK

In the second of this series of articles about owls in the UK we focus on the tawny owl - one of the most iconic birds in the British countryside but one that is often heard but rarely seen.

Tawny Owls - the scary sound of horror!

Lie awake in the early hours of the morning in winter and that familiar, eerie haunting sound that breaks the silence is probably a tawny owl...or possibly two. Most of us call it a 'twit-twoooo', a mournful sound often used for creating a scary atmosphere in horror films.

But did you know that 'twit-twoooo' is actually a duet between a male and a female tawny owl? The night-time call can start with either but often a male will begin with a long, hooting hu...hu-hu-hoo-hoo.

And if there is a female in the area, she might make a sharp, loud keewik contact or return call. If they become resident, the pair often duet with the male hooting and the female pitching in now and then with her keewik reply. The sound is most often heard just after sunset or in the hours before dawn in late autumn and through the winter.

What does a tawny owl look like?

Although these are the most common owl in the UK it can be very difficult to spot one as they are mostly nocturnal. They can occasionally be heard during the day and, very rarely, seen at roost during daylight hours. They have a rounded, brown face with dark, forward-facing eyes, no ear tufts and mottled brown or grey plumage

providing perfect camouflage against tree bark. If they are on the wing, you'll probably see them flying directly from tree to tree and can look like a large brown bird, or even quite pale in car headlights. They are usually 37-39 cm in length, with a wingspan of about 94-104 cm.

When and where are you most likely to see them?

Tawny owls are highly, and aggressively (even against humans!) territorial, birds and once they secure a territory can remain in it for life. They are primarily a woodland species but have adapted to live almost anywhere there are mature trees including urban parks and gardens, hedgerows and copses. You are most likely to see them hunting at night. You may be lucky to see them snoozing at roost during the day in trees although this is difficult as they like to hide, especially among ivy.

What do they hunt?

Their diet is mainly small mammals including mice and bank voles but if the territory is right they will also eat field voles, rabbits, moles, frogs, earthworms, beetles and, sometimes, fish. They have also been known to eat carrion when food is scarce.

Where do they nest?

Tawny owls nest in a variety of locations including cavities in trees, the forks in tree trunks, old squirrel drays and old pigeon or crows' nests. They also like purpose-built nesting boxes. They usually lay one clutch of two to three eggs in late



winter or early spring and incubation is about 30 days. Fledging is usually after about five weeks. Youngsters can leave and re-turn to the nest during these weeks.

How long do tawny owls live?

In the wild, the typical lifespan is around four years. They tend to mate for life. According to the RSPB, tawny owls are the UK's most common owl but the population declined by more than 40% between 1995 and 2023.

Why are tawny owls under pressure?

They are difficult to study because they only come out at night but experts believe habitat loss and a lack of prey may be among the problems.

Do they have predators?

They have a range of predators including birds of prey, other tawny owls and foxes. Eggs and chicks are also vulnerable to squirrels, rats and domestic animals.

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.

Plant broadleaf trees and create rough grassland and ponds. You can watch nest sites from a safe distance that doesn't disturb the birds.

And finally....

If you find a young tawny owl on the ground, the advice is to leave it alone as it is probably not in trouble. (If it is a young Barn Owl it will need rescuing and putting back in the nest.)