

# The Ghost of the Grasslands

*A Guide to the Barn Owl (Tyto alba)*



With their striking heart-shaped face and pure white underparts, Barn owls are instantly recognizable. At a distance, the overall impression on seeing this bird is that it is pure white. However, this is really only the underside of the bird; their back and the top of their wings are a beautifully mottled buff and grey color.

They are easiest to spot in the autumn and winter when they are regularly seen hunting during the day. They also frequently perch on fence posts where they easily stand out!

## Built for the Hunt: Physical Features

Barn owls are lightweight marvels, weighing between just **250g and 350g**, yet boasting an impressive wingspan of approximately **80cm to 95cm**.

- **Long-Legged Predators:** Their legs are noticeably long, which they stretch out to pluck their prey from the ground.

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- **The "Satellite Dish" Face:** According to the *Barn Owl Trust*, that iconic heart-shaped facial disc acts like an amplifier, funneling the faintest rustles of small mammals directly into their ears. Their ear openings are asymmetrical (one higher than the other), allowing them to pinpoint prey in total darkness.
- **Silent Flight:** The *RSPB* highlights that Barn owls possess specialized, soft, fringe-like serrations on the edges of their flight feathers. This absorbs the sound of air moving over their wings, making their flight completely silent so they can ambush prey. However, the *BTO* notes this comes at a cost: their feathers lack waterproof oils, making them highly vulnerable to starvation during prolonged rain.

## Voice and Diet

If you hear a Barn owl, it is a shrill, screeching sound—so it is not surprising that an old traditional name for them is the "**Screech Owl.**" You are most likely to hear a Barn owl in the spring when they call to attract a mate. (You can listen to a Barn owl call via online archives such as the RSPB or BTO websites).

## What's on the Menu?

Mice, voles, and shrews are most commonly eaten. However, Barn owls swallow their prey whole, and their stomach acid cannot digest bones or fur. Instead, they cough up compressed, black oval masses called "**pellets.**"

**Local Discovery:** Recent owl pellet dissection carried out by the **Malmesbury and District Natural History Society** in association with the **Wiltshire Mammal Group** showed that their diet is highly adaptable; frogs and even bats will be taken on occasion when standard mammal prey is scarce.

## Lifelong Partners & Courtship

Barn owls generally mate for life. They are highly faithful to their partner and often return to the same nesting site each year. Pairs tend to share, and defend, the exact same territory, though *The Wildlife Trusts* note they may choose to roost separately outside of the breeding season to rest.

Courtship starts in early February or March, though the exact timing depends heavily on the local availability of food. To woo his mate, the male will bring food to the female, and the pair will engage in mutual preening and an endearing behavior known as '**bill fencing**'!

## The Breeding Cycle & Asynchronous Hatching

Typically, four to seven eggs are laid in April or May at two-to-three-day intervals. Incubation begins as soon as the first egg is laid, meaning the chicks hatch at different times and vary wildly in size.

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This evolutionary strategy, known as **asynchronous hatching**, helps maximize reproductive success when prey availability is unpredictable. In a bountiful year, all chicks may survive. However, in a year where prey is in short supply, the older, stronger siblings will predate the younger and weaker chicks in a harsh but necessary survival process known as '*facultative siblicide*.'

## Habitat & Home

Barn owls prefer habitats that combine suitable nesting sites with plentiful hunting grounds, such as open countryside, field edges, and mixed farmland with rough, tussocky grasslands where small mammals thrive. As their name suggests, they often roost in old barns or other farm buildings, but they are natural cavity-nesters and will readily use hollow trees, deep rock crevices, and man-made nest boxes.

## Conservation: The Raptor Project

These magnificent birds suffered a severe decline during the twentieth century, largely linked to the widespread agricultural use of toxic organochlorine pesticides (like DDT), alongside the devastating loss of rough grassland habitat. Fortunately, data from the *BTO* and *RSPB* indicates that their numbers began a heartening recovery between 1995 and 2008, thanks to strict bans on these chemicals and targeted conservation work.

## How You Can Help Locally

The **Malmesbury and District Natural History Society** wants to actively support the Barn owl's return to its historic pre-pesticide numbers. Because modern intensive farming has resulted in the loss of many old barns and hollow trees, providing artificial cavities is one of the most effective ways to support them.

### Get Involved with the Raptor Project

As part of our local Raptor Project, we are actively building and installing new nest boxes in prime habitats across our local area. If you are a local landowner or farmer with rough grasslands and would like to host a nest box, please get in touch with the Society!



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