

The Pocket-Sized Predator

A Guide to the Little Owl (Athene noctua)



Little owls are small, stocky birds which grow to around 21cm to 23cm. They have distinctive grey-brown plumage flecked with white, piercing bright yellow eyes, and—seemingly to humans—a permanently grumpy expression! Unlike many of their nocturnal relatives, they are frequently active during the day as well as at dawn and dusk, making them a remarkably familiar and charming sight across the British countryside.

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An Elegant History & Unique Habits

Though they feel like a native staple, Little owls were actually introduced to the UK in the late 19th century by wealthy landowners. According to *The Wildlife Trusts*, they very quickly settled into the ecological landscape. Their scientific name, *Athene noctua*, honors the Greek goddess Athena, to whom this diminutive bird was a sacred symbol of wisdom.

The Head-Bobbing Alarm

A key behavioral characteristic of a Little owl is their comical inclination to bob their heads rapidly up and down, or sway side-to-side, when they are startled or alarmed. As Britain's smallest owl, they have to be exceptionally cautious. This behavior actually helps them judge distances and map out potential danger, especially where large native predators like Buzzards and Sparrowhawks are concerned!

Hunting & Flight Style

Little owls can often be seen perched boldly out in the open on telegraph poles, low branches, or stone walls while hunting. Interestingly, they do not just hunt from the air; they are incredibly agile on the ground and will actively chase down running insects or scampering rodents across fields. When they do take off, they exhibit a highly distinctive, bounding, undulating flight pattern—a rhythmic dipping movement that looks remarkably similar to a green woodpecker.

Diet and Foraging Habitats

These adaptable owls are happy to live in a variety of landscapes including mixed farmland, orchards, open grassland, allotments, and mature suburban gardens. Essentially, they thrive anywhere they can easily forage for their preferred diet of earthworms, beetles, and other ground invertebrates. Reports from the *BTO* note that they are heavily drawn to freshly turned soil, where invertebrates are easily exposed.

Gardener's Companion: This affinity for open soil is well-known to growers. When keeping a vegetable garden, observers often note that a Little owl will visit regularly right after the soil has been dug over to snap up unearthed treats! While earthworms are a favorite, their broader opportunistic diet also encompasses mice, voles, shrews, small reptiles, and amphibians.

Territory and Nesting

Little owls are both highly territorial and strictly monogamous, frequently staying with the same partner for life and occupying the same patch of land year after year. Between April and May, the female lays a

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clutch of 2 to 5 white eggs. Because they are natural cavity-nesters, they look for hollows in mature trees, gaps in dry stone walls, or even old rabbit burrows.

According to the *RSPB*, the female does all the incubating, which takes roughly 4 weeks, while the male does all the heavy lifting to catch and bring her food. After hatching, the chicks grow rapidly and fledge around 5 to 6 weeks later. However, the juveniles remain entirely dependent upon the parents for food and protection for several weeks after that before being pushed out to find territories of their own.

Conservation Status & Local Action

Despite their successful integration, the British population of Little owls is facing a quiet crisis. Long-term monitoring by the *BTO* reveals a staggering **65% drop over 25 years**, alongside an 11% contraction in their geographical range across the UK. Today, the population is estimated at just **5,700 breeding pairs**. The *RSPB* attributes this decline to agricultural intensification, which removes the old hedgerows and dead trees they nest in, coupled with the heavy use of chemical pesticides that wipe out their primary food source of large beetles and earthworms.

Support our Little Owls

We are fully dedicated to reversing this decline and increasing the numbers of Little owls in Malmesbury and the surrounding area. By restoring wild grass margins and installing specialist, predator-proof artificial nest boxes on orchard trees or farm buildings, we can secure their future. Get in touch with our local project to find out how you can host a box or support our survey work!



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