

The Voice of the Woodlands

A Guide to the Tawny Owl (Strix aluco)



On a cold and dark autumn or winter night, it is the Tawny owl that you are most likely to hear calling out into the darkness. This iconic sound is actually a classic wildlife duet: the sharp, piercing **'keewik'** is typically the female's contact call, while the long, echoing hoot of **'huhuhuhoo'** is the male responding to mark his territory. Together, they create the famous 'tu-whit tu-whooh' soundtrack of the British night.

Physical Features & Masters of Camouflage

If you are lucky enough to spot a Tawny owl during the day, you will see how beautifully they blend into their surroundings. They are expertly camouflaged by their rich, mottled reddish-brown feathers and a much paler underside, which mimics the texture of tree bark. They have large, rounded heads dominated by striking, dark forward-facing eyes.

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- **An Exceptional Field of View:** Unlike human eyes, a Tawny owl's eyes are completely fixed inside their bony sockets and cannot move. To compensate, they have evolved the incredible physical ability to rotate their entire heads by up as much as **270 degrees** in either direction without moving their bodies.
- **Advanced Night Vision:** According to the *RSPB*, their large eyes are highly specialized to gather every fraction of available light. Paired with remarkably asymmetrical ear openings under their feathers, they can easily locate and strike moving prey in complete darkness using hearing alone.
- **Flight Mechanics:** Data from the *BTO* notes that like barn owls, they possess velvet-like coatings on their feathers that muffle the rush of air, granting them totally silent flight to ambush unsuspecting woodland prey.

Habitats and the Urban Shift

The natural and most preferred habitat of the Tawny owl is mature, established broad-leaved and mixed woodland. However, as ancient woods have fragmented, they have proved surprisingly resilient. Today, they can regularly be found living in leafy urban parks, large wooded suburban gardens, older tree-lined cemeteries, and church graveyards. However, the *BTO* highlights that they are highly modern-forest dependent; they will rarely cross large bodies of open water or expansive treeless fields, meaning they are easily isolated if local woodlands are cleared.

An Opportunistic Diet

It is estimated that there are roughly **50,000 breeding pairs** of these strictly nocturnal hunters across Britain. While small woodland mammals like wood mice, bank voles, and field voles are their absolute favorite prey, they are highly opportunistic predators with an extraordinarily varied diet.

What's on the Menu? Depending on what is available locally, they will readily take small roosting birds, amphibians, reptiles, large nocturnal insects, earthworms, and even bats on the wing. Like other owls, they swallow smaller meals completely whole. The completely inedible parts—such as fur, bones, and beetle carapaces—are compressed by the gizzard and cleanly regurgitated as dark, textured owl pellets, which conservationists study to track ecosystem health.

Lifelong Bonds & Fierce Territoriality

Tawny owls typically establish their partnerships in the autumn, around October and November, when young, independent owls are actively dispersing to claim new territories. Once a pairing is established, they remain paired for life. These established pairs occupy and defend their chosen territory vigorously throughout the entire year, rarely wandering more than a few kilometers from their central roost.

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By mid-March, the female begins laying her eggs—typically a clutch of 2 to 4. According to *The Wildlife Trusts*, there is a short, distinct time gap between the laying of each individual egg. This results in staggered hatching, which creates an evolutionary safety net: in years where food is scarce, it ensures that the oldest, strongest chicks are prioritized, significantly increasing the likelihood of at least some of the brood surviving.

Conservation Status & Local Challenges

Despite still holding the title of the most common owl in the UK, the Tawny owl is currently classified on the **Amber List** for birds of conservation concern. Long-term monitoring projects from the *BTO* reveal that their populations have fallen dramatically in recent decades. This decline is largely driven by the loss of old-growth woodlands, the removal of ancient, hollow trees which provide their natural nesting hollows, and the reduction of prey availability due to urban sprawl and intensive habitat management.

Bring Back our Tawny Owls

We are highly motivated to support and increase the numbers of Tawny owls in Malmesbury and the surrounding rural areas. Because they are completely dependent on tree cavities, the loss of mature woodland is a major bottleneck for them. By installing specialized, deep wooden nest boxes high up in mature trees in woodlands, we can give these magnificent hooting duets a secure home.

Contact our local project today to find out how you can help or host a box!



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