

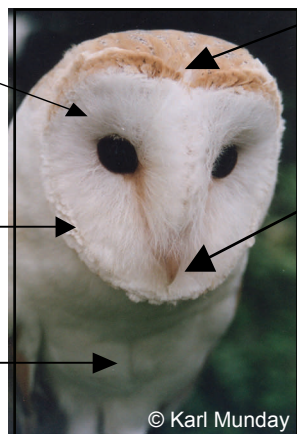
ABOUT THE BARN OWL

IDENTIFICATION

White, heart-shaped

Can rotate their heads 180° and are able to locate prey by sound alone

About 35cm in body length



Pale buff plumage on its upper body and wings. Colouring is similar in male and female

Barn Owls have a distinctive 'screech' call

Although nocturnal, Barn Owls are often seen hunting in the evening and early morning

© Karl Munday

HABITAT

Barn Owls are found all over mainland Scotland, particularly on mixed or extensively managed livestock farms. Most breeding pairs are found 50-300m above sea level.

Barn Owls feed almost entirely on small mammals such as the field vole, common shrew and wood mouse. Other prey include frogs, fledglings, pipistrelle bats and rats. Barn Owls typically hunt in a 1.5km radius of the nest and need a large area of rough, tussocky grass on which to hunt. Preferred habitats include extensively managed grassland, woodland edges or wayleaves, new woodlands, set-aside and field boundaries such as hedges, tracks and watercourses. All these harbour small mammals and offer Barn Owls sufficient hunting ground for successful breeding. Fence posts, trees and hedgerows provide Barn Owl perch sites for hunting. In large areas where no natural perches occur, extra posts can be knocked in.

BARN OWL NEST SITES

Barn Owls nest in cavities in mature trees or more frequently in farm buildings or man-made structures. Barn Owls will reuse old nest sites, which are often filled with pellets, provided they remain undisturbed and have a plentiful supply of food in the surrounding area. Eggs are laid between April-May and can number up to 8.

Nest boxes vary in size and shape, partly depending on whether they are to be located internally or externally. Buildings where boxes are to be sited should be quiet and dark, have open access to hunting ground and preferably have two entry/exit points. Small ledges will prevent juveniles falling out of the box. Nest boxes can also be erected on individual trees or woodland edges where there is a clear flight line to the entrance of the box. These should be situated between 3-4m above ground level and nestled beside branches on which juveniles can perch. The box entrance should be sheltered and face away from prevailing winds.

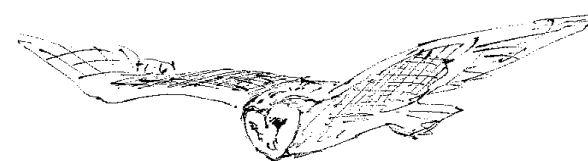


© Shirley Paterson, FWAG

The Barn Owl Projects running in Tayside will provide Barn Owl nest boxes to be erected on farms. These will be sited where advised by FWAG or SAC Farm Conservation Advisers. Having several places to roost is beneficial as male and female owls prefer different roost sites depending on time of year and whether they have chicks.

THREATS

Barn Owls are now on the amber list of "Birds of Conservation Concern" because populations have declined by 70% in the past few decades. This is due to several factors such as habitat loss, road kills, loss of suitable nest sites and poisoning through second generation rodenticides. The Barn Owl projects in Tayside aim to address these issues through advice on habitat management, provision and siting of nest boxes.



Barn Owls In Tayside

TAYSIDE BARN OWL SURVEY

The Barn Owl has long been known as "the farmer's friend" as it hunts for small mammals over rough grassland and in the vicinity of steadings. The loss of old barns and the birds' increasing reliance on the rough grassland along rural roadside verges has resulted in a serious decline in its population. For 4 years now the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership Barn Owl Interest Group have been collecting data on Barn Owl sightings.

Unfortunately quite a few of the birds reported to the Tayside Barn Owl Survey have been road kills. However, since the survey began the number and spread of Barn Owls throughout Tayside has proven to be far greater than first realised, with farmers reporting seeing Barn Owls for the first time in years. Until now, publicity about the fact that this survey is underway has been through press releases, in the Scottish Agricultural College (SAC), Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) and Tayside Biodiversity Partnership (TBP) newsletters, on the TBP website and by word of mouth to farmers, landowners and other contacts working with SAC and FWAG Farm Conservation Advisers throughout Tayside. Through the Barn Owls of Lowland Scotland Project (BOOLS), funding has become available for survey postcards to be printed, some of which are being circulated in Tayside. These will be made available through libraries, council offices, rangers stations and other public buildings, as well as being sent out to farmers and landowners by local FWAG, SAC and RSPB offices.



© Carol Littlewood, Angus FWAG

The data collected through the survey has and will continue to be used, to allow FWAG and SAC Farm Conservation Advisers to target their farm visits through current and any future Barn Owl Projects in Tayside.

The data is being collated by the Barn Owl Interest Group and a map of Tayside sightings will be produced as part of a large map of sightings reported through the BOOLS Project (see page 3).

**SO LOOK OUT FOR THE BARN OWL SURVEY
POSTCARDS AND SEND US YOUR SIGHTINGS!**

Tayside Biodiversity Partnership - Barn Owl Interest Group





TAYSIDE BARN OWL PROJECT

The Tayside Biodiversity Partnership Barn Owl Interest Group's decision to apply for SNH funding for a Tayside wide Barn Owl project started all the Barn Owl work currently being carried out in Tayside.

The Tayside Barn Owl Project was an umbrella title that covered 3 projects, 1 in Angus and 2 in Perthshire. In Perthshire, SNH funding allowed SAC to deliver 10 farm surveys, identifying suitable habitat for Barn Owls and looking for signs of their presence on land along the Tay corridor. Each of these surveys was followed up with a report highlighting what had been found on the visit and suggesting changes in management that would benefit Barn Owls. The SNH grant also funded the purchase of some Barn Owl boxes and a generous donation from C R Smith Home Improvements Company allowed some extra nest boxes to be bought, so that in all

SAC and FWAG sited 20 nest boxes along the Tay corridor. These boxes are being watched by either the farmer, landowner or their staff and if there is any sign of them becoming occupied, such as birds being seen or pellets/feathers below the box, a member of the Tay Ringing Group is asked to investigate further. Investigation of Barn Owl nest sites requires an SNH licence, which is why Tay Ringing Group members have kindly agreed to be involved.

In Angus, the SNH funding also allowed 10 farm visits and reports to be carried out, but instead of buying nest boxes, wood was bought to make them. A simple box design was used so that special woodworking equipment was not required for the job. Some wood was donated to the project by Kinnordy Sawmill and this was delivered to Rossie Secure Accommodation's site near Montrose, where the children and young adults helped make the wood into nest boxes. Boxes were also made by members of the public in Kirriemuir, staff at Taypack Potatoes at Moncur and by individual farmers and landowners to be put up on their own land. In all 25 boxes have been put up through the original Angus Project and one, erected in a field shed has already got a Barn Owl in residence. These boxes are being monitored in a similar way to the Perthshire project.

The second Perthshire project involved Farmers and Landowners in Glen Errochty and was being organised by the National Trust For Scotland (NTS). Unfortunately, staff changes meant this project came to an early end but the money allocated to it was used to purchase more wood for the Angus Project.



BENEFITS TO BARN OWLS THROUGH THE RURAL STEWARDSHIP SCHEME

Many farmers in Tayside have been successful in applying for funding from SEERAD to take part in the Rural Stewardship Scheme (RSS) over the past 5 years. This agri-environment scheme helped fund farmers to create extended hedges, sow grass margins around their fields, create new areas of species-rich grassland and wetland and sow plots of unharvested crops, all of which benefit Barn Owls as well as other important wildlife species. FWAG and SAC Farm Conservation advisers in Tayside prepared many of the applications submitted to SEERAD on behalf of farmers and landowners. In 2005 and 2006 funding was available to erect large bird boxes, i.e. ones suitable for Barn Owls. Successful schemes prepared by FWAG and SAC Farm Conservation Advisers in Tayside included 10 Barn Owl nest boxes, sites for which were identified when the farms' RSS audits were carried out.



The RSS is now closed to applications and changes in agri-environment funding mean that a new scheme, Land Management Contracts, should be fully up and running by 2008. There are 3 Tiers to this scheme and the habitat creation options of benefit to Barn Owls are in Tiers II and III. SAC and FWAG Farm Conservation Advisers will be helping farmers apply for grants to carry out habitat enhancement and creation under these new schemes as soon as they are open to applications.



BARN OWLS OF LOWLAND SCOTLAND PROJECT (BOOLS)

The Tayside Biodiversity Partnership is one of four Local Biodiversity Partnerships (LBAPs) to have successfully secured £25,000 funding to help the Barn Owl in lowland Scotland from the Biodiversity Action Grant Scheme (BAGS), administered by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). Tayside, Fife, Clackmannanshire and Stirling areas have received two years funding to deliver a multi-partnership, cross-boundary Barn Owl Project. Over Tayside FWAG and SAC Farm Conservation Advisers will be delivering 34 visits over the next 2 years, giving advice specific to management of the farm for Barn Owls. The visits will identify all habitats on the farms suitable for Barn Owls to use for hunting and also 1 or 2 sites on each farm that are suitable for erecting nest boxes, which the project will then provide for the farmer to put up. The survey data will be used to target visits.

As part of the project, as well as the survey postcards already mentioned, the RSPB are working with one school in each area. The RSPB education officer talks to the children in the classroom about ecology and the Barn Owls and what they need and helps each group build some Barn Owl nest boxes for the project. In some cases the group are taken out to see a nest box that has been put up on a farm quite near their school.

There are to be two farm walks (one for Tayside and Fife and one for Clackmannanshire and Stirling), looking at what Barn Owls need to be successful.

The Tayside and Fife walk is on Wednesday 18th April 2007, 6.00 - 7.30p.m. at Peacehill Farm, Wormit, by kind permission of Peter and Mary Forster. For further details please contact Fran Gordon, Fife & Kinross FWAG on 01738 450500.



UPLAND ANGUS BARN OWL PROJECT

Following the end of the Tayside Barn Owl Project and the start of the BOOLS Project, Angus FWAG has secured funding for the Upland Angus Barn Owl Project. This funding is from the Cairngorms Local Biodiversity Partnership Grant Scheme and visits and reports are on offer, similar to those offered through BOOLS. Grant monies are funding Angus FWAG to deliver 8 half-day farm visits, followed by a Barn Owl Management Plan. The project is providing 32 Barn Owl nest boxes, suitable for indoor or outdoor placement and is paying the printing costs of this newsletter, the preparation time having been supported by Angus Council.

The project is being targeted in the what was the Cairngorms Partnership Area, which includes most of Angus to the north of the A90. The Barn Owl survey data collected indicates that the area from Brechin to Lintrathen, up to about 250m above sea level, is where most Barn Owl sightings in Angus have been reported. The foothills of the Angus Glens has a large amount of rough grassland, which makes particularly suitable hunting habitat for Barn Owls.



Each farm that is visited through the project will be provided with 2 nest boxes, to be erected in positions the Angus FWAG Farm Conservation Adviser has identified as suitable. The project is being supplemented with 8 extra visits, funded by Scottish Natural Heritage through local priority conservation visits they fund FWAG to deliver.

PERTSHIRE BARN OWL PROJECT

The Perthshire Barn Owl Project is the latest Barn Owl project in Tayside to be successful in attracting grant funding. SAC's Conservation Adviser in Tayside will be delivering the project with funding from the SITA Tayside Biodiversity Action Grant.

The project is again focusing on the Tay corridor in Perthshire, including the River Isla and will concentrate on a core area, expanding on the earlier Tayside Barn Owl Project and the BOOLS Project. This focused area is one of the strongholds of the Barn Owl in Perthshire.

