

# About the Barn Owl

## Barn Owl - Tyto Alba

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The Barn Owl has a very pale golden-buff coloured back laced with silver grey and is very white underneath. It has a heart-shaped white face. An adult Barn Owl is about 33 cm. high with a wing-span of approximately 85 cm.

Barn Owls have superb sight and hearing which enables them to catch their prey in the dark. When hunting they drop silently down on to their prey and grab it with their talons, killing it instantly. They can swallow their food whole and the indigestible parts, the bones and fur, are regurgitated in the form of a pellet. Analysing Barn Owl pellets can tell you exactly which small mammals the owls have eaten.

Most Barn Owls have a short lifespan with only one out of every four to five surviving for more than a year. It is unusual to find a wild Barn Owl of more than six years old although the longest recorded lifespan is twenty-one years!

Barn Owls can breed in their first year. They don't build a nest but usually choose a ledge in a building or a hollow in a tree where the white eggs are laid. The female starts to sit as soon as the first egg is laid - incubation takes 31 days. There can be an age difference of several days between owlets. On average, 5 - 6 eggs are laid, with 3 - 4 hatching and only 2 - 3 owlets actually fledging. One brood (family) per pair per year is normal, although in areas with good habitat and therefore a plentiful food supply, two broods in a year are possible.

Barn Owls are crepuscular; they hunt mainly at dusk and dawn, flying low over rough grassland, hedges and ditches looking for voles, shrews and mice. Over a whole year (including breeding) a pair of Barn Owls and their family may consume 5,000 small mammals.

Barn Owls have very soft feathers, which help them to fly almost silently and to hear the small mammals they hunt. When weather is bad the owls have great difficulty finding food, their soft feathers are not very waterproof and so they cannot hunt well in rain. Barn Owls are very lightweight for their size and cannot fly well in very strong wind. Many Barn Owls starve during periods of prolonged snow cover. Life can be hard for Barn Owls, particularly during the winter.

In Britain the Barn Owl population decreased by an estimated 70% (about three quarters) during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main cause of decline is the reduced food supply caused by changes in the way we farm and many Barn Owls are killed each year on roads. The verges of rough grass on the sides of motorways and dual carriageways are attractive to owls as they contain many small mammals. When Barn Owls are hunting they fly about two to four metres above the ground and so are easily hit by fast traffic. Other localised causes of Barn Owl decline include the loss of old barns available for nest sites and the use of modern rat poisons.



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Picture by Andrew Miller

