

Issue Number 16

# FEEDBACK

1996/97



Barn Owl Trust Waterleat Ashburton Devon TQ13 7HU Registered Charity No 299 835



Photo: Kevin Keatley

## A Great Year For Barn Owls



See page three for more details.

**The Barn Owl Trust: Conserving the Barn Owl and its Environment**

# A Great Year For Barn Owls

The size of the Barn Owl population is determined by two things - how many die and how many young are produced. These things are in turn decided mainly by food availability which is related to weather, habitat quality and prey numbers.

Well, 1996 has been the best breeding season for Barn Owls that we can remember. Since 1990 Barn Owl Trust staff and volunteers have monitored 62 wild Barn Owl breeding sites, checking that all is well, recording the number of young in the nest and in some cases fitting BTO rings. Normally we find broods of two or three young - the average success rate is 2.4 young per breeding attempt.

This year we found twelve broods of 4, four broods of 5 and three broods of 6!! Unfortunately however we also visited a few sites where the Owls had either failed to breed or disappeared altogether. BTO ringing enables us to monitor the mortality rate and causes of death and is an essential tool for population

*(Continued from page 2)*

Can you help us to do this? Is there someone you know that might like to become a Friend or could support the Trust in some other way? Could you organise a fund-raising event? We have a leaflet packed full of ideas of ways in which you can help, ask for a copy of our A to Z of Fund-raising. We hope you enjoy reading this issue of Feedback. We have



*The BTO ringing of an Owlet*

*Photo: Muzz Murray*

monitoring. Recoveries of ringed birds have highlighted the importance of road mortality. This is the subject of a new research project by the Trust, see page 11.

On September 23rd the total number of Barn Owls ringed by the Barn Owl Trust reached a staggering total of 1,000!

included some news about our resident birds, as well as information about forthcoming projects and something you can do to help Barn Owl conservation without moving from the comfort of your own home, see page 13 for details. From everyone here at the Trust, thank you once again for your support. Happy reading.



Our thanks go to Roger Swinfen, Keith Grant and David Ramsden for all their hard work over the years.

Lets hope that winter 1996/97 is dry and mild which will hopefully improve the survival rate of this years young.

## In Memorial:

The Trust has received two pecuniary legacies, one from the estate of the late Miss Nancy Patricia Wilson and the other from the late Miss R V Rook. We have also received a donation in memory of Mrs Ann Gafsen who passed away in April. Our sincere condolences go to the families and friends of the deceased and our thanks for considering the Barn Owl Trust at this time.

# The Year of the Little Owl

This has been an unusually good year for Barn Owls, however, most of us here at the Trust will remember 1996 as the year of the Little Owl. This was the first year that any of our resident Little Owls have bred. At the end of April Spook and Sparkle produced a brood of four Owlets, three of which they successfully reared and which we released into the wild.

Soon after this we started to get calls from people finding wild Little Owlets, in a lot of cases, such as the one where Owlets were found in a cob wall that was being demolished, we could just give telephone advice about providing alternative accommodation nearby so that the parent birds could continue to rear the young. In another case where a tree containing a Little Owl nest had been felled the birds went temporarily to the RSPCA and then were passed on to us.

Diesley, Fen and Penny were brought back to the Trust after a site visit in East Devon, all were very thin and a fourth Owlet was found dead at the site having been squashed by a vehicle. They had been picked up after being found sitting under a Land Rover and despite a search of nearby buildings no nest site could be located. In addition one of them had received a liberal coating of diesel and needed a thorough clean, hence the name! The arrival of a late youngster at the end of June (Brendon) brought the total of Little Owlets here for release to thirteen, too many for one aviary, hence the need to rush ahead with the construction of our new mobile aviary (see pages 6 & 7). During the summer Little Owl nestboxes were erected at Waterleat and the Owlets were all fitted with BTO rings to enable future identification should they ever be recovered.

At the end of August eight of the Owlets were released from one of

Photo: Sally Jowett



our release aviaries and after nearly three hours of sitting and watching we were rewarded with the sight of them flying out of the aviary in a very relaxed and casual way. We've had no sightings of them since release which, although a little disappointing is, apparently, to be expected. We can only hope that having been given a second chance at life in the wild some of them will get through the winter and produce Little Owlets of their own in future years.

#### Did you know:

- ◆ Little Owls were introduced to Britain in the 19th Century.
- ◆ They are the smallest British Owl.

- ◆ Little Owls often hunt over the same areas as Barn Owls and have even been found to share the same trees or buildings for breeding sites.
- ◆ Most active around dusk and dawn, Little Owls will however hunt during the day and will often sit out during the day to sun bathe.

In 1994 the RSPB recorded 1,065 offences against wild birds. Of these 612 involved birds of prey or Owls

## Mobile Release Aviary Continued

became too dark for us to see. A couple of days later on a wet evening one returned to spend the night and the next day in the aviary. Over the next few days we observed two Little Owls "playing" at dusk and food was being taken by one or two owls from the aviary. A neighbour observed one on her kitchen roof one morning some days later and one was spotted twice some half a mile away.

Food continued to be taken for about ten days. At the time of writing we have not observed any Owls for about a week, so we hope they are all safely integrated into the wild. This is a

reasonably safe area. Most of the land owners are quite sympathetic and we continue to watch to see if they are still in the area. We hope that by having had the Owls in the aviary prior to release they will have learned about the area which will help them to adapt to their life in the wild.

The aviary was built in August when it was desperately needed for the release of young Owls. Unfortunately we didn't have time to raise the money before building it. Thank you to the suppliers who provided materials at discount for the project which helped to keep

the costs well below the anticipated £1,102, we managed to do the whole thing for just less than £550. We are still hoping to find some retrospective funding and help with running costs, so if you would like to sponsor the mobile aviary all of the Barn, Tawny and Little Owls that will be released from it in the future would be very grateful.

## Spring Fayre

For the last 5 years I have organised a Spring Fayre to raise money for the Trust. With the help of loyal friends and family we have got together a wonderful selection of cakes, jams and craft work and have planted and propagated around 300 plants, I have been told by an expert they are of very high quality. This Spring we raised £500 for the second year running. I would like to thank all those who donated items and a special thank you to all who helped on the day. If you would like to donate plants, cakes, crafts etc. for the next Spring Fayre which will be in Kingsbridge, Devon on April 26th 1997, I can be contacted via the Trust.



The Barn Owl Trust needs help to raise funds. Why not run a similar event in your area or a smaller fund-raising effort by perhaps selling any spare plants at the garden gate or a coffee and cakes morning. Children, how about a sponsored silence or perhaps a car cleaning morning. They are fun to organise and all contributions will be gratefully received!

Margaret Crocker



Photo: Frances Ramsden

# Some Words On The Birds

In addition to the Trust's main areas of work we care for injured and disabled Owls and provide sanctuary for those that are not able to survive in the wild. The definition of the word sanctuary is "a place of refuge" and that is exactly what we provide for the birds in our care - we do not operate a visitor centre or display them to the public. We usually have between 45 and 60 birds here at anyone time, however during the summer it peaked at 68 when we had an influx of young Tawny and Little Owls. Most of the permanent residents are Barn Owls, either disabled wild birds or unwanted captive-bred birds. We also have a quite a few disabled Tawny and Little Owls and a resident Raven ! *Rave*, as he is known, came to the Trust in 1993, he shares the "Pond" aviary with three Tawny Owls and Barn Owls, *Spirit*, *Kirk* and *St. David*. *Rave* doesn't fly because of an old wing injury but he manages to get about the aviary really well, since he has been here he has learnt to imitate the office telephone.



*Rave the Raven* Photo: David Ramsden

The three Tawny Owls in the "Pond" aviary, *Winking*, *Blinking* and *Nod* were rescued by the RSPCA and came to the Trust in 1991 as did *Spirit*. *Kirk* arrived in 1994 and *St. David* is a fairly recent arrival, May 1996, he came to us via St. David's Veterinary Practice in Exeter.

Two other new arrivals this year are



*Ollie the Owlet* Photo: Frances Ramsden

*Ollie* and *Thursday*, both Tawny Owls. *Ollie* was brought to us in May as a juvenile and was subsequently found to be blind and *Thursday*, another of this year's youngsters, arrived from the RSPCA in September, too imprinted (tame) to be released into the wild. We have also taken in several other unwanted captive-bred Barn Owls, however in order to retain space for disabled wild birds we are now having to apply a strict policy when asked to take captive-bred birds.

We are currently treating three casualty Tawny Owls, *Brian*, *Tribe* and *Quick*. They had all been hit by cars. *Tribe* was found walking down the central reservation of the A38 dual carriageway and was rescued by PC Tribe of the Traffic Police. Hopefully they will all make a full recovery and we will be able to release them fairly soon, possibly from our new mobile release aviary.

During the Summer we have received and released six young Tawny Owlets and an adult Barn Owl. We have also had a kestrel

brought in which had to be put down and a young Barn Owl that fell from its nest place and subsequently died of internal injuries, this winter we will erect a box at this site to prevent a reoccurrence in future years. On a lighter note we are currently housing 20 hedgehogs on-route from the RSPCA to their new homes with BOT volunteers. Hedgehog boxes have been arriving at Waterleat for their new residents to become accustomed to before being moved out to life in the wild.

It is now more than a year since *Moon* the Trust's tame Barn Owl died. During her lifetime she accompanied our Conservation Officer on 213 school visits all over the Westcountry. It is always really sad when you lose a bird, particularly one with a personality as big as *Moon* - she was a hard act to follow. *New Moon* was bred here at Waterleat (Christmas 1995) and is doing a great job. Although quite a different character from her predecessor she has settled into the school visit routine extremely well. *New Moon*, like *Moon* before her, is never tethered and goes voluntarily into and out of her travelling box. She makes about one school visit a week.

Recently TV presenter Jessica Holm visited the Trust to have her photograph taken with *New Moon* to promote a new series for Westcountry Television, "Wild Westcountry", due to be screened in January 1997. The first episode of the series looks at the licensed release of captive-bred Barn Owls.



Photo: Richard Lappes

*New Moon* with David Ramsden

# Major Road Research Project

## New Research on Barn Owls and Roads An update (continued from issue 15, page 3)

There is no doubt that roads, particularly major roads, are a significant cause of Barn Owl mortality. Over half of all reported deaths are road deaths. However, birds which die in conspicuous places such as roads are far more likely to be reported than birds which die in remote locations. Therefore, although we know that lots of birds are killed we don't know how important road deaths are in comparison to starvation which is likely to be the most significant cause of death.

Clearly, never-ending road construction is not sustainable and if life on earth is to continue into the third or fourth millennium alternative methods of transport must be found. Unfortunately successive governments have sustained the road building programme and promoted our "car-culture". People from all walks of life are now involved in a growing anti-roads lobby. The Newbury by-pass was perhaps the most actively opposed road in Britain with colossal sums of money spent on removing and excluding protesters from the construction area. The car is a symbol both of our freedom as individuals and our destruction of the environment as a species. If the road building programme continues there can be little doubt that the relative importance of Barn Owl road deaths will increase. Policies which restrict the use of cars are unlikely to win votes, therefore main-stream politicians are most unlikely to ever take the lead in the anti-roads campaign. The extent to which our society and industries currently depend on roads can easily be demonstrated. The effects on the environment and on declining species is not so easily quantified. Some people do not believe that wildlife should be conserved for its own sake, that it is only worthy of attention if it makes money or

Photo: David Ramsden



attracts votes. At present the two areas from which change is likely to come are grass-roots opposition (massive protests) and scientific evidence showing the environmental effects of road construction and use. Whether to drive and/or protest or how to vote is a matter for each of us as individuals. Scientific research into the effect of major roads on Barn Owls is however a matter for the Barn Owl Trust!

It has been estimated that nationally thousands of Barn Owls are killed on roads each year and yet there has been very little research done to establish the overall effects of major roads on Barn Owl populations. Given the amount of data the Trust has accumulated on Barn Owls in the South West and the expanding network of dual carriageways here, we are ideally placed to launch a major investigation.

The Major Road Research Project comprises three sections. Section One is based on the A30 survey work described in Feedback issues 6 and 15 and looks at the distribution and status of Barn Owls

in a 22 sq. km study area before a dual-carriageway was built and three years after it was opened. Section Two, which is underway, compares the distribution and status of Barn Owls along a 14 km stretch of motorway with a similar "control" area for comparison. Section Three which has only just started aims to plot the movement of individual Barn Owls in relation to the network of major roads and to measure the relative mortality effect of different road types.

The project was designed by the Trust and is being carried out with the help of degree students from two universities. Ironically, field research always involves driving! Like you, we are road users too! We admit to being a part of the problem, however this project will go some way towards restoring the balance, attaching to wildlife the importance it deserves. If the landscape were flat, if we didn't have to be in so many different places at once, and if we didn't have to carry a 30' ladder, then YES! We would use bicycles !!

David Ramsden  
Conservation Officer



# Help Barn Owls In Your Area

Wherever you live in Britain you have a Local Authority, usually called a District or Borough Council. Each Local Authority has a Planning department which produces a Local Plan setting out the councils policies and "vision" for your district. Planning Committees decide upon individual planning applications.

In your area there may be Barn Owls living in farm buildings for which a planning application for conversion or change of use has been submitted.

In April 1995 the Barn Owl Trust sent a copy of its new booklet "*Barn Owls on Site - A Guide for Developers and Planners*" to every rural Local Authority in Britain. The covering letter drew attention to a set of recommendations (see below) in the booklet for Barn Owl conservation.

These were formulated by the Trust after almost five years work on the Barn Conversion Research Project.

Recommendations 2 - 6 call for changes in local policies. As you will know from previous issues of Feedback some Local Authorities have already adopted our recommendations, others may need a little more encouragement or some further prompting to consider the issue.

The Barn Owl Trust doesn't have the resources to lobby every individual Local Authority, but with a very small amount of effort and for the cost of a stamp and a telephone call YOU can help the Barn Owls in your area:

- Write to the Principal Planning Officer of YOUR Local Authority, (you can

find his or her name by telephoning the local council offices, the number will be listed in the phone book under your Local Authority ).

- Ask them what their policies are regarding Barn Owls and barn conversions.
- Enquire if they have implemented any of the Trust's recommendations from page 48 of the *Barn Owls on Site - A Guide for Developers and Planners* booklet that they received in April 1995.

Please send a copy of your letter and any response you receive to the Barn Owl Trust, Barn Conversion Campaign, Waterleat, Ashburton, Devon TQ13 7HU.

Thank you

## Barn Conversion Research Project Report Recommendations.

1. The protection afforded to Barn Owls under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 should be extended to include sites which Barn Owls use in the same way that bat roosts and breeding sites are protected.
2. All Local Authority Planning Officers should, as a matter of course, receive sufficient training to enable them to recognise signs of occupation by Barn Owls (droppings, pellets and feathers) and should check for these during site visits.  
*Note: This is not a difficult or time consuming task.*
3. In the processing of planning applications, Local Authority Planning Officers should inform the relevant Country Agency (English Nature, Countryside Council for Wales or Scottish Natural Heritage) in cases where there is any evidence of possible occupation by Barn Owls.
4. Local Authorities should, without exception, stipulate that provision for Barn Owls is incorporated (into the conversion) at every site where there is any evidence of the current or historic use of the site by Barn Owls.  
*Note: The cost of making such provision during a conversion is minimal. Also, experience shows that there are no significant health or nuisance implications.*
5. Local Authorities should, as a general policy, stipulate that provision for Barn Owls is incorporated into all barn conversions, irrespective of whether or not Barn Owls are present, unless the site is within an urban area or more than 300 metres above sea level.
6. In cases where planning permission is required for a new agricultural building over three metres high, Local Authorities should stipulate that provision for Barn Owls is incorporated.  
*Note: This is inexpensive and can be done in such a way as to prevent the birds having access to the whole interior of the building thereby avoiding possible conflict with salmonella control.*

# More BOT News

## Goings ....



“ Sharon with an unusual hat.... ”

Sharon Clayborough (*pictured left*) her post as Admin Assistant in September (after two years with the Trust) to go off to University to get a degree. The Trustees presented Sharon with an unusual hat as a thank you for all her hard work and as a reminder her of her time with the Trust. We wish her loads of luck with her course.

Fortunately for us Sharon insists on continuing her work with the Trust's Adoption Scheme in a voluntary capacity, so we haven't seen the last of her.

Steve Panks has returned to university after working six days a week for the Trust since February. Steve will continue to come in one day a week to help out with conservation work until June 97. Congratulations are in order for Steve who achieved a joint first for his placement project on the effects of a new dual-carriageway on local Barn Owl distribution and status. Well Done Steve !

## .... and Comings



Welcome to Valerie Lurcock (*pictured above*).

Valerie is the Trust's new Admin Assistant and is in the office on Tuesdays and Thursdays answering the phone, sending out information leaflets, typing letters and helping out with the 101 other things that need to be done.

## Busk for Barn Owls



Cornish Wildlife Artist Dick Twinney and Friends raised £100 for the Trust with a "Busk for Barn Owls"

and a raffle. Dick says " Don't take any notice of our serious faces, we were trying to look Victorian !

“ ..Don't take any notice of our serious faces, ..... ”

We all really enjoyed ourselves". It sounds like it was great fun - thank you all.

Dick has also very kindly donated a signed Limited Edition print for this years BOT AGM Auction. The print *Barn Owl and Young* (*pictured left*) was published by Lyndhurst Studio to mark the Artists 20th anniversary.

Despite having been in touch with Dick since 1987 it was June this year when actually met for the first time at the Royal Cornwall Show.



# Thanks and Things

Thank you to all of you who have returned you draw ticket stubs and money, particularly to those of you that included an additional donation. We are very grateful for your support. Winners will be notified during the week beginning 28th Oct.

Thanks to everyone who has sent an SAE for our new Sales Goods leaflet, it is underway and will be posted to you soon.

A special thank you must go to Mike Wallsh who organised the sixth Annual BOT Letterbox Walk on

Dartmoor and to Barbara and Alan Lucas who raised nearly £100 by organising a Letterbox Walk in the New Forest. Thanks too, to Kevin from PowerForge Computers Ltd. who has saved our sanity more than once this summer.

Following our usual *Can You Help* piece in the last issue of Feedback we are very grateful to:-

David and Barbara Webb for donating display boards, Lyndsey Lindley for waterproofs, Belinda and Steve Smith for waterproofs

and cat food, B Gamblin for a donation to buy cat food for the hedgehogs and mice for the owls, Linda and Peter Chapman for tools, the 4th Teignmouth Brownie Pack for sending in their old coins and G.W.Paterson for the 3 pint teapot.

We also need to thank all the volunteers that have helped out by collecting casualties for us and picking up Owl food.

A really big THANK YOU to everyone that has given their support to the Trust.

## Look Out for Barn Owls on the Roads

This is the time of year when you are most likely to come across dead and injured Barn Owls on the roads. **If it is safe to stop**, please check the condition of the bird and whether it has a ring on its leg. If the bird is alive and active cover it gently with a towel or coat before you pick it up - in the case of Owls the feet are more likely to hurt a rescuer than the beak.

As soon as you can, put the bird into a well ventilated cardboard box somewhere warm and quiet and ring the BOT, the RSPCA or your local vet for advice. If the bird is alive and you are unable to stop safely

please telephone the nearest **local police station** and ask them inform the traffic police. If the bird is dead don't forget to check for a ring, record any numbers, letters and the colour of the ring and remove the body from the side of the road to prevent other drivers stopping.

Whether the bird is dead or alive, if it's a Barn Owl please ring us and report the location, give us a six figure map reference if you can, we also need to know any ring details, the date of finding and of course the condition of the bird.

Having recently been to a BOT talk David Parker has been looking out for Barn Owls on the road and in just over a week he found 5 dead on "A" roads in Cornwall !

### In an Emergency

The BOT doesn't have the resources to have someone sitting by the phone 24 hours a day, however our office answering machine gives a Live Bird Emergency number to be used whenever the office is closed. We are currently using a BT answering service to deal with emergencies and we return all calls on the emergency number as soon as is humanly possible.

## Tail Piece

Having spent four very long days in front of a computer screen to put this issue of Feedback together I had to go out of the office to remind myself about the real world. Its very easy to get caught up in dead-lines, lists and targets and to lose your sense of the really important things in life. Standing under a black velvet sky and hearing the stream burbling away, Owls calling and hedgehogs snuffling with the scent of wet leaves on a cool evening breeze is a

wonderful way to adjust my sense of perspective. Autumn is such a wonderful time of year and so bountiful, with hedges absolutely bursting with fruits nuts and berries. I recently went to the harvest festival at my daughters primary school and whilst I was there looking at all those little people with their futures stretching before them two thoughts ran through my mind; one was that people in our society are really wealthy - most of us have enough to eat, a roof over our

heads and the luxury of choices in our lives. The other thought was that the children of today won't have the choices that we have now - rates of extinction are up to 1000 times faster than they have ever been and one species is being lost every hour. We all have a responsibility to do what we can to preserve the natural world for future generations. By supporting the Barn Owl Trust you help us to conserve the Barn Owl and its Environment which also helps other species.

