

Issue Number 17

FEEDBACK 1997



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



Cover picture: Kevin Keatley

INTERNATIONAL ISSUE

News inside from... 
Spain, India, Germany & Home

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

Barn Owl Trust News



↶ The BOT mobile rehabilitation and release aviary is the first of its kind in the country - and probably the world! It was designed and built by Trust staff and volunteers. The idea was to create an aviary that could be taken anywhere and set up for use as temporary accommodation.

When a rehabilitated wild owl is ready to be released, the aviary is taken to the area where the bird was found. The owl is then installed and given time to adjust. Eventually the roof is opened so the bird can fly out. The aviary remains in place so that the owl can return for food and shelter if it wants to. Once the bird is able to fend for itself, the aviary can be packed up and driven to its next location.

Photo: David Ramsden

The launch in February received lots of media coverage locally, regionally and nationally. The aviary is a strange site - it looks like a wire-mesh caravan - so if you see it on the road, you'll know that we're off to rehabilitate another owl.

Nestbox workshops at Cockington Country Park and Bodmin Beacon during the winter provided 40+ new homes for Barn Owls in the South West.

Photo: Kevin Keatley

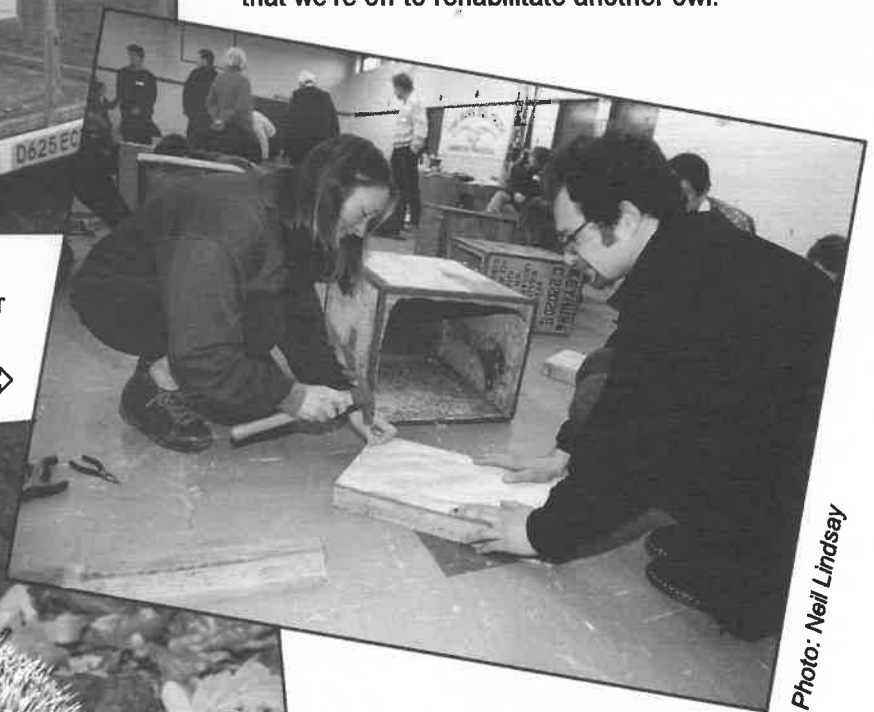


Photo: Neil Lindsay



BOT volunteers provided release sites for the 20 young hedgehogs that came to us from the RSPCA in September. Another 11 prickly balls arrived at the end of November. With support from the Trust and generous donations of cat food from customers of the Somerfield store in Ashburton, 10 survived their first winter and have now left us for life in the wild.

At the Trust

There's a really friendly bunch of people working at the BOT and we thought it would be nice to introduce you to some of them. Here's a quick run-down of who's new and a little background on some of the old hands. There are too many volunteers to include them all and unfortunately we rarely get everyone in the same place at the same time, so there are only a few of us in the picture.

New volunteers include **Paul Bray**, a purchasing officer with Devon County Council who spends his Saturdays cleaning aviaries and refereeing volley-ball matches. **Judy Cummings**, a physiotherapist and long-time Friend of the Trust, came to a nestbox work-shop and then volunteered to help in the office. **Karen Barton** was a volunteer with the Trust before she moved to Weymouth five years ago. She's now back working at a local medical practice, and helping us again. **Alan Barton** has rejoined us in the office after completing an IT course. **Maxine Ewing** and **John Bryan** help out with aviary cleaning, maintenance and anything else that needs doing inside and out.

In the photo:

David Ramsden became the Trust's conservation officer in 1990. He carries out research and practical conservation work, gives talks, makes site-visits, goes out to schools, looks after the resident birds and works on the Trust's specialist publications. David acts as the Trust's spokesperson on TV, radio and in the papers. He has two children and enjoys both listening to and making music. He has a fascination with anything that flies and an interest in indigenous cultures, especially Native American.

Sue Williams has been with us for four years, one as a volunteer, three as a paid part-time member of staff. Sue manages our data-base and the Friends scheme and deals with the information and advice service.



Back row, left to right: David, Sue, Frances, Valerie, Sandra; front row, Steve and Phil. Photo: Maxine Ewing.

She's now in her final year of an art and design degree, spending any free time at the potter's wheel.

Frances Ramsden is one of the five BOT Trustees and oversees the day-to-day running of the Trust, including the staff, fund-raising and charity administration. An interest in environmental education led to her involvement with the Trust. She has three children and in her free time enjoys gardening, reading and basketry.

Valerie Lurcock worked for the council before coming to the Trust in August 1996. She is our receptionist, manages the Trust's diary and helps with the information service. She has three children, three grand-children and a geriatric Airedale called Angus.

Sandra Reardon began working for the Trust in November. She deals with adoptions and conservation admin. She has a background in graphic design and computers, and has (with her husband) run her own business for

some years. She's proving invaluable in the office, especially when it comes to desk-top publishing. She's enlisted the artistic talents of her husband and one of her two sons on the BOT's behalf.

Steve Panks first contacted the Trust in 1994. He began a student placement with us in July 1995, in February 1996 he was taken on as a part-time conservation assistant, and worked full-time for seven months. He is now employed one day a week and is finishing his degree in Rural Resources Management at the University of Plymouth. He likes walking and listening to music.

Phil Knowling is a freelance writer who usually works for advertising agencies, writing the ads that compel you to buy all those things you never knew you didn't want. A local lad, his hobbies include cartooning, music, reading, football and the arts. He is now using his talents to help spread the Barn Owl conservation message.

Send a Letter for Barn Owls

You probably read the piece in the last issue of 'Feedback' about our campaign to make local planners more aware of the needs of Barn Owls.

The Trust spent five years working on the Barn Conversion Research Project, as a result of which we drew up a list of recommendations that could make a real difference to Barn Owls without proving expensive or time-consuming.

Some local authorities have adopted our recommendations in full, others are considering them.

What really makes a difference is if planners get letters reminding them why Barn Owls need help and explaining how easy it is to put our ideas into practice.

We know that a lot of you want to help us by writing to your District or Borough Council, but when it comes to putting the words on paper inspiration dries up!

To save you sitting and staring at a blank sheet of paper, we've written the letter for you. Just copy out what we've put - or something like it - and send it to the Principal Planning Officer of your local authority (contact the council offices to find their name).

Please send us a copy of your letter and any response you receive.

Go on, give it a try - this is local democracy at work!



Small Bird Boxes

The Trust is based in a small wooded valley where the majority of trees are fairly young, providing few natural nest sites for hole-nesting birds. Back in the early 1980s we began to erect small bird boxes in 12 acres of private woodland adjacent to the Trust and in 1992, with assistance from Ashburton Watch Group, we increased the number of boxes to almost 60.

The boxes have attracted Pied Flycatchers, the attractive summer visitors that come all the way from Africa. In fact since 1990, 211 Pied Flycatchers have been hatched and ringed here. Two have subsequently been located breeding at other nestboxes on the edge of Dartmoor and we've had two reported dead.

In addition to providing homes for Pied Flycatchers, the boxes have also played host to numerous families of Blue Tits (133 ringed), Great Tits and Nuthatches. We have also had Tawny Owls breed in one of our larger boxes, although it was up for more than ten years before they decided to use it.

As with Barn Owl boxes, small bird boxes work well in areas with a good food supply but a shortage of natural sites.

For more information on providing nestboxes for a variety of species, the BTO Guide 20, Nestboxes, is an invaluable source of information. It is available at £5.60 inc. p&p from BTO, National Centre for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Nunnery Place, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU.

A nestbox could be all your garden needs to provide a home for an avian family.

Spring Cleaning Success

We are very grateful to all the volunteers who gave up their Sunday and helped out with the Trust's annual Spring Clean recently. Tasks included painting and decorating, cleaning, moving several tons of new gravel into aviaries - very heavy work - (thanks to E & JW Glendinning Ltd for supplying it), building a new office door, reroofing a shed and rubbing

down the paint work on the BOT box trailer. Unfortunately we always seem to have outstanding lists of these types of tasks. So if you have a practical disposition and fancy joining us for a friendly day of fairly hard graft contact the office. Tell us how you're prepared to help and we'll let you know when we're doing it again.

Dear

Please can you tell me what the council's policy is with regard to Barn Owls and barn conversions.

As I'm sure you are aware the Barn Owl is a lot rarer today than it used to be and it is a protected species.

I understand that the Barn Owl Trust has sent you a copy of its Barn Owls on Site booklet with a list of recommendations to help you ensure that there are still sites for the birds.

I would be interested to know whether you have adopted the Barn Owl Trust's recommendations or are considering them. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,

.....

Next Nestbox Workshop

22nd November 1997

Bradworthy, Devon

Send an SAE for more details

... in the Cauvery Delta

BREEDING BIOLOGY

Barn Owls nested almost throughout the year: the observed peak period was from November to May. The clutch size varied from 3 to 9 and the brood size from 2 to 7 nestlings. Eggs were laid at almost two day intervals and they hatched in that order (as in Britain). Thus, a gradation of sizes of nestlings was observed within a nest. Often egg laying females abandoned the eggs if they were disturbed, but were more tolerant after starting the incubation. Eggs were incubated for a period of 30 to 35 days.

Though both the parents were seen in the nest, only the female was incubating the eggs throughout the period. The females were found with a semi-circular shape 'brood patch' under the stomach during the incubation period.

The growing nestling inside the egg responded by vocalisation to the siblings one day before hatching. The hatching success was 63%. The nestlings were voracious eaters of rodent pests, often engulfing the entire prey. Because of this feeding activity the nestlings grew fast and fledged in between 70 and 75 days.

In the early stages of flying, the sub-adults (seven to nine weeks old), after wakening in the evenings, preened continuously for a long time and tried to fly.

Fledging success was 60%. The overall nesting success was 50%.

BREEDING LOSSES AND PREDATORS

Human disturbance was the main cause of breeding losses. Rural people believe that the very sight of the Barn Owl near to their houses and habitation has ominous implications. They also believe that the Barn Owl's screeching near to their dwellings portends a death in the house and they also consider the appearance of the Barn Owl around their houses as a sign of evil and misfortune. These beliefs lead them to kill this timid nocturnal bird or to chase it away.

However, people were informed through wall posters, leaflets, local newspapers, radio, television and meetings about the bird and its valuable role in controlling rodent pests on their agricultural lands, and this made them accept the Barn Owl as their friend. Now farmers are starting to install nest-boxes and place perching poles on their land.

We observed that siblings often died in large broods because of cannibalism, in most cases the last two siblings were the victims. The nestlings of two ground nests died due to heavy external parasitic infection.

We often saw abandoned eggs in temple nests due to human disturbance such as temple decorations and renovation work. Once eggs were predated by crows. Another interesting observation was that the eggs were stolen by Barn Owl prey, the house rat. Severe cyclones brought heavy rain that

washed off all the eggs and nestlings from three of our study nests; two nest-boxes with eggs and nestlings were crushed due to the damage to the trees in which they were fixed. The nestlings of three temple nests were eaten by a domestic cat from an adjacent house.

ARTIFICIAL PERCHES

Artificial perches were provided in different seasonal crop fields where the activities of rodent pests were high. The perches were made in different heights - 3ft, 6ft, and 9ft high with a 2ft cross bar (2 inch diameter) - and placed 10m from the bounds of the agricultural land. The distance between two poles was between 10 and 15m.

The 9ft poles were readily-accepted by the Barn Owls during the first week. Other birds such as Black Drongo, Small Green Bee-Eater, White Breasted Kingfisher and Blue Jay or Indian Roller also used the poles. The density of rodent pests and their damage to rice crops was found to be reduced in the fields with 9ft high perching poles. As a result, it has been suggested that farmers place 9ft high perching poles to encourage Barn Owls to control rodent pests in the rice fields. It has also been suggested that they remove the perching pole during the ripening stage of the crops to stop grain eating birds using them.

R. Nagarajan

Mice go Nuts in Winter - Caught in the Act !



Photo: David Ramsden

Paul Bray, our aviary cleaner, was convinced someone was playing practical jokes on him when he kept finding his welly boots half filled with peanuts. However we discovered the culprits ! During 17 days of sub zero temperatures (January '97) these four woodmice

moved into the out-building where we stored the peanut bin (for stocking up the bird tables). Why they kept moving hundreds of nuts into Paul's boots remains a mystery (they ignored the others). But we've solved the problem now by moving the boots, and the peanuts, into another building.

...a daily diary of a BOT lecture trip to Spain

6th Marzo, jueves (Thursday)

Visited the University to see their animal specimens. To prepare the skeletons they remove the skin and meat, boil the bones, then fit them back together with wire! They had a great collection, including Barn Owl and Eagle Owl skeletons and sharks with skins on. The bird collection room smelt rather odd, and we had to wear masks - not to protect us, but to protect the specimens from the moisture in our breath. Their many stuffed specimens included a huge Golden Eagle.

Drove to the edge of the Parque Nacional de Donana - one of the most important wetland habitats in Europe. Saw Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Flamingo, Grey Heron, White Stork, Black Kite, Marsh Harrier, Corn Bunting, Black-Tailed Godwit. On the way back to Umbrete we saw Little Owls perched on the electric wires beside the road above the olive groves. Night falls very quickly; it was dark very soon after 8.00pm. We were promised a longer trip around the park at the weekend.

7th Marzo, viernes (Friday)

Going out for breakfast is unusual - but I could get used to it! Had traditional thinly-sliced sundried ham in small, hard bread rolls and leche manchada (spotted coffee - milk with just a spot of coffee in it).

Second presentation at 11.00am. Again, about 50 Spanish students. Talked about the results of our research into the release of captive-bred Barn Owls and our Barn Conversion Research Project; how we encourage people to make provision for Barn Owls when they convert old barns. In Spain, many Barn Owls live in towns, which shows how adaptable the birds can be.

The talk was two hours long and ended with loud applause, which was great.

Back to Seville in the evening. The Plaza de Espana is a huge brick building with arcades in a semi-circle around a big plaza with a tall fountain in the middle and boating lakes. It was dark when we arrived and it was all lit up, which was spectacular. Each of Spain's 50 provinces is represented by a scene painted on ceramic tiles. It's a popular meeting place, and people were out enjoying the warm evening air. Spain is a more outdoor country than Britain - but then, they do have the climate for it!

Sanderlings, Lesser and Yellow-legged gulls, Turnstones, Cattle Egret, Oystercatchers, Little Egret and Peregrine Falcons (which breed in an old watchtower built originally to keep a look-out for pirates).

Drove through the woodland to a lake where we saw White Stork, Grey Heron, Jabali (wild boar), a female Marsh Harrier and Red Deer. Then through the marsh, spotting more Jabali (with young), Roe Deer, Cormorants.



Photo: Frances Ramsden

8th Marzo, sabado (Saturday)

Got up at 5.30am and drove right into Donana National Park. 8.30am - boarded an extraordinary-looking vehicle with 25 seats, very high ground clearance and four-wheel drive - it looked like a cross between a Land Rover and a coach. We were lucky to get a place, as they are usually booked up well in advance. It cost 2,500 pesetas (£11) per seat, but it was worth every penny.

The park has four main types of habitat - beach (the largest undeveloped stretch of coastline in Europe), Marismas (seasonally-flooding wetlands), sand-dunes and pine woodland. We drove for 30kms along the beach and saw

We also saw and heard lots of frogs, which make a very different sound to the ones in this country - they croak in Spanish!

Over the dunes, splashing through great puddles and roaring down the slopes; one minute we were in a desert habitat, the next in damp scrubland. Saw a pair of Black Kites overhead, then a Black Redstart and a Garganey Duck - apparently a real rarity in Spain.

9th Marzo, domingo (Sunday)

As part of Inigo's research he makes regular trips along the same sections of road in order to record

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Nestbox Vandals

Four young lads were caught by a landowner following the destruction of a Barn Owl breeding site in a traditional farm building in South Devon.

The boys (aged 8-10) managed to dislodge the nestbox from the top of a wall 18 feet above the ground - it was thoroughly smashed.

This site is a well-used traditional site where the birds breed every year and had just laid this year's first egg. An adult Barn Owl was seen flying around the site in daylight, alerting the landowner to the problem.

Disturbance to a Barn Owl breeding site at such a sensitive time could not only result in failure to breed, but could mean that the birds desert the particular building or leave the area altogether. BOT staff rushed to the scene and

erected a new box which was nailed firmly to the beams 30 feet above the ground.

Conservation Officer, David Ramsden, said, "It must have been very difficult for them to reach the box and fairly dangerous too. They were lucky not to have hurt themselves".

Disturbing a Barn Owl breeding site is an offence under the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act and offenders are liable for a maximum fine of £2,000 per bird or egg disturbed.

The Community Police Officer for the area will be visiting the children concerned and 'having a word' with them, in the presence of their parents. This will hopefully deter them from such wanton acts of destruction in the future. In the meantime we can only hope that

the birds haven't been too traumatised, and will make another attempt to breed this year. We'll let you know !

In Memoriam:

The Trust has received a legacy from the estate of Miss E L Watkins.



We have also received donations in memory of Mr Keith Collinson.

Our sincere condolences go to the families and friends of the deceased and our thanks for considering the Barn Owl Trust at this time.

Oranges and Owls

(Continued from page 11)

the numbers and varieties of owls. This meant getting up at 4.10am... after having gone to bed at 2.30! We drove the transect two and a half times between 5.00 and 7.00am. Saw just one Barn Owl and twelve Little Owls.

In this area, most owls perch on telegraph poles and wires while out hunting. Inigo noted this in his research - then one day, without warning, a lot of the poles were taken down! This meant that the owls had nowhere to perch - how will this affect the results of his work? Ate a traditional Spanish paella - which tastes so much better than anything you can get in this country - with tortilla de patatas and Russian salad, then strong coffee and local oranges to follow. Met the local vet, who showed us X-rays of injured owls (which was more interesting than it might sound). You could see

the pieces of lead shot in some of the X-rays; in Spain many owls (and other birds) are killed by people out shooting.

10th Marzo, lunes (Monday again)

Visited a local owl rehabilitation centre and were shown around by a couple called Enrique and Paloma who didn't speak much English, but we managed to communicate - somehow! Saw lots of White Storks, in trees and on roof-tops. Some of the permanent residents of the centre - two Griffon Vultures, a Common Buzzard and a Black Kite - live in a magnificent aviary 50 metres long by 9 metres wide by 5 metres high. Another beautiful enclosure - 60m long, 9m wide and 5m high, with a large pond and hollow trees - was specifically for birds that needed flying practice before release. Four Montague Harriers were in here.

Plenty of waterfowl - we saw lots of Flamingos and hundreds of ducks. The centre is also home to the world's only captive breeding Crested Coots, they're very aggressive at breeding time.

After that we had to go back to Inigo's house, pack, say our many goodbyes and leave for the airport. It was a wonderful trip - we learned a lot, and hopefully passed on a few tips about owl conservation in this country. It was all arranged and paid for by the University - so many, many thanks to everyone who made it possible, and made us so welcome.

Back to England - a cool, damp evening, busy roads and dense fog on the motorway. Oh, it was great to be back...

David Ramsden
Conservation Officer

Bird-Watching Made Difficult

Steve is an artist and illustrator, and was a volunteer with the Trust at the time he was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. He writes:

It was rather strange, finding myself suddenly unable to walk.

Cleaning aviaries is hard work but rewarding. The aviary cleaner before me was also an artist; perhaps the job is peculiarly suited to painters, poets, musicians.

Ashburton is noted for its excessive precipitation; one could feel quite foolish, spraying a hose-pipe about in the pouring rain. There was I, dripping, while the birds sat happily in their nice dry boxes. Foolish or not, it was a pleasure to make a contribution to the lives of these beautiful creatures.

On the day-of-not-being-able-to-walk I soon realised that something was wrong; I became tired, I started to limp, and it wasn't just exhaustion. These formerly-reliable limbs seemed to be giving up.

I was sure that it - whatever it was - would clear up in a while. In the meantime, I looked out the walking-stick I had been given - prophetically? - one Christmas. Walking down the street it seemed entirely necessary.

The resident birds would watch me silently while I cleaned their homes.

Some had broken wings that would mend, others had permanent conditions that meant they could never fly again. They would live out their lives in a place built especially to shelter them and suit their needs.

Sitting here now in my new house-with-a-hoist, I can see that I am adapting fairly well to a life of (ridiculous word) 'disability'. After I was hospitalised for the second time I had to walk with crutches for a while. It was hard work; it needed the very co-ordination and timing that the slow coming of MS had taken from me. A physiotherapist helped.

Baby Barn Owls learn to walk before they can fly, and when threatened are known to fall over onto their backs and stick their talons out. I, when threatened, lie down muttering the names of Greek philosophers. It works - people always go away. My partner has adopted a Barn Owl called 'Spirit', but I'm biding my time until there is one named 'Diogenes'. If the resident population keeps increasing, the Trust will soon have to turn to the Greek philosophers for inspiration.

Steve Taylor

*A Barn Owl doesn't necessarily
Live in a barn,
But farm-building owl
Just doesn't sound right!*



Our Barn Owls Need You!

We care for between 40 and 50 Owls at any one time - all of whom are unable to be released into the wild, either due to injury or because they are captive bred and no longer wanted.

Barn Owls can live for up to twenty years in captivity.

Feeding and caring for them is quite expensive. You can help - for the sum of £30 a year you can

adopt a Barn Owl

We will send all the information we have on 'your' owl, together with a poster, photograph, car sticker and newsletter.

And if the adoption is a gift, we will enclose a card with your personal message.

For more details telephone 01364 653026 and ask for a leaflet or send an SAE to: Adopt An Owl, Barn Owl Trust Waterleat, Ashburton TQ13 7HU

Newspaper Clippers Needed

If you regularly read or buy newspapers or magazines please take the time to cut out any bits of Barn Owl news. It helps tremendously if you write the date and the name of the paper on each item you clip. To save postage put them somewhere safe and save them up until you've got a few.
Thank you.

New Badges and Stickers

We now have a new Friends' button badge and a reprint of our car sticker with the prefixed telephone number.

Friends can have one of each free.

To get yours just send us a stamped addressed envelope marked 'badge and sticker'.



Thanks and Things

Thanks to those of you who helped the Trust by providing the items we requested in the last issue of Feedback: Peter and Shelagh Denham for the wonderful donation of a caravan, Marie-Anne and Graham Martin for filing cabinets, Michael Lond for sheets and pillow cases, Vaughn Upson for nailboxes, Lesley Smith for nails, Pat and Norman Dunham for the box trailer, Alison Robbins for waterproofs and everyone who provided food for the hedgehogs during the autumn and winter. We also have to say a special thank you to the family who sent us the nail box and hammer.

Can you help- or do you know someone who can ?

Do you have any of the following items that are surplus to your requirements? We are currently looking to recycle and give a good home to:

A6 card filing drawers
Clean **used** C5 envelopes (slit)
Post driver
Portapotti (as used in caravans)
Automatic jug kettle
Office chairs -swivel type
Garden rakes

Video camera - ever optimistic !
(We'd like to make a recording of some of the things the Trust does to circulate to BOT Friends).

Steel retractable tape measures (3m and 5m)

Pincers (for pulling out nails)

Woodworking set squares

We would be delighted to hear from anyone who can help - thank you for your consideration.

Concern for Swifts

Modern building methods, changes in building regulations and better maintenance are all excluding swifts from their usual nesting places.

If you would like more information about how you can help these

wonderful summer visitors send a 20p stamp with your name and address to:

Concern for Swifts leaflet, RSPB,
Sandy, Beds. SG19 2DL.

Feedback is produced for the Friends of the Barn Owl Trust with contributions from volunteers. Thank you to everyone who provided words and pictures for this issue.

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Frances Ramsden

Phil Knowing

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Design: Frances Ramsden

Cartoons: Phil Knowing

Tail Piece

"Giving funds for Barn Owl conservation is a waste of time, all their sites are disappearing and they all get killed on the roads". This was the response we received from a company we recently approached for assistance. This pessimistic outlook was modified somewhat after discussions with our staff and the company concerned did make an offer of support.

Unfortunately, this attitude is not uncommon and certainly not limited to corporations and businesses. "Why bother?" and "We can't do anything" are phrases all too frequently heard from the lips of individuals when confronted with environmental problems. In fact we can all make a difference to our immediate environment and lots of little differences add up to big ones. During the 20th century the human race has been responsible for a

huge amount of damage to the natural environment which has had a disastrous effect on the wildlife that rely upon it. Surely we are all responsible for helping to conserve what remains.

A recent visitor to our night sky, the comet Hale-Bopp, can be seen glowing gently in the north west to a chorus of Tawny Owl calls. The surface of the earth has changed dramatically since the comet's last fly past several thousand years ago. I wonder how our planet will look next time it visits.

The spring this year has produced a profusion of flowers and blossom. The bird song here at the moment is wonderful and the territorial displays of the Chaffinches, Tits and Green Finches add colour and excitement to the day. An oak tree just outside the office is coming in

to fresh green leaves and a Tree-Creeper scuttles up its trunk. It's a very beautiful scene and we're fortunate to share it.

Although much has been lost we do still have a countryside. We are lucky that there is still time to protect and conserve what remains.

Barn Owl conservation benefits many other species, and as Friends and supporters of the BOT you help us to fulfil the aims of conserving the Barn Owl and its environment. What we do together does make a difference, the survival of existing sites and the creation of new ones is happening now because of your support.

*Together we can make
a world of difference.*

