

FEEDBACK 2

This is the second annual issue of Feedback the aim of which is to bring you up-to-date and encourage your continued support.

Surely none of us are unaware of the urgent need for Nature Conservation nor the need at a more basic level to give more consideration to the earth and all the life forms which share it. Having recently watched various T.V. programmes (on environmental issues) I'm beginning to understand ecology.

So many of our present day problems are a direct result of a lack of understanding of ecology - of how everything is linked to everything else - the interdependence of life. Total disregard of eco-systems results in the creation of deserts - literally the Sahara is man made. The starving millions in Africa are dying because we (man) felled the forests and drastically over-grazed the grassland. The regular floods in India are the result of the clear-felling of the upland forests of that region. Every single living thing is dependent on other life forms for its survival. We are no exception. The trouble is, it's not just our own survival as a species which is threatened. If we make this planet uninhabitable for humans, millions of other species will suffer extinction as well!

When you begin to realise just what we are doing to this fragile earth don't get too depressed. Most people when faced with this knowledge feel unable to do anything about it. You CAN. There are so many ways in which we can all help the earth - eat organically grown food, buy less plastic, buy lead-free petrol, make a Wildlife Garden, plant a tree, save newspapers tin cans and silver paper for re-cycling, join 'Friends of the Earth' or 'Greenpeace' or the 'Devon Trust for Nature Conservation', tell people what you are doing and why. Support this Barn Owl scheme and you'll be doing your bit too.

Releasing a few Barn Owls (although very worthwhile in itself) won't save the world it may not even save the Barn Owl from extinction but it will be a step in the right direction. Saving the Barn Owl requires an increase in the awareness of the need to conserve the countryside - particularly rough grassland and hedgerows - we can achieve this and at the same time increase the potential for change on a wider scale.

Many thanks to all those involved in last years releases. Thirty one Barn Owls were released from seven sites in different parts of Devon. The situation on 24th March '87 was as follows.

Yelverton

An adult pair with four owlets in the nest were released on the 29th April '86 from a large stone barn. The male and two of the

owlets later died but amazingly a wild male appeared on the scene and paired up with the female helping her to rear the two remaining owlets. The female laid another clutch of eggs in June which she later deserted perhaps because the two owlets were still in the box with her! The two owlets left in August '86. This year the wild male and captive-bred female are still both using the barn and may well breed in the nestbox. Food is still being provided occasionally although not enough to sustain the female who is almost certainly finding her own wild food.

Ottery St. Mary

An adult pair with three owlets in the nest were released on May 16th '86. The events of that evening were a disaster from which I learned several lessons! The male was found alive eight days later and returned to the site to be re-released. The female was never seen again and the male disappeared when re-released. The three owlets were fed direct and flying by early June and regularly seen outside the site and returning for food. By late July they too had gone. There are still no owls at the release site this year although one Barn Owl did turn up in a barn 1/2 a mile away where previously there were none.

Ausewell, Ashburton

An adult pair with two owlets in the nest were released on July 13th '86. The adults soon disappeared and so we fed the owls direct. They dispersed gradually as they learned to fly and although no owls remain at the release site a Barn Owl is seen occasionally 1/4 mile away where none were seen previously.

Drewsteignton

During January '86 one of the adult pair escaped and was found dead three miles away ten days later. We went to great lengths to try and make the old cob barn owl proof but evidently didn't quite manage it. Incredibly by June a wild male had found its way in to be with our still-captive female! Not wishing to hold a wild owl captive we released the two on 4th July. One only was seen after late summer and none since February '87.

Modbury

An adult pair with four owlets in the nest were released on May 15th '86. By early June both adults were regularly seen hunting over adjacent cornfields and the owlets started to venture outside the building. The adult pair laid a second clutch of eggs in September and reared another three owlets which flew in December. By March '87 only two Barn Owls remained at the site - probably the adult pair which should breed again this year.

Harbertonford

An adult pair with one owlet in the nest were released on July 7th '86 and although we didn't see the owls fly out that night within

three nights both the adults had gone. The owlet was fed direct and within four nights of learning to fly it too disappeared. None have been seen since. This is a particularly lovely site for Barn Owls - the reason for their disappearance remains a mystery.

Water-leat, Ashburton

The three adults due for release bred unexpectedly and were released on July 1st 186 along with three owlets. Three weeks later I found one dead having choked on broken rabbit bones. By the end of July the adults had dispersed and by mid August the owlets too had gone. On August 11th 186 one of the adults was picked up dead (waterlogged in a field) three and a half miles away.

Barn Owl still at Release Site (3-87)	4 (inc. one Wild One)
" Owls still seen nearby (where none before)	2
Dispersed Gradually	21
Disappeared Suddenly	7
Found Dead	5
Total Released (1986)	34 (inc. one 2nd brood)

From these seven releases we learned a great deal. At first I was rather disappointed that most of the owls moved away from the release site rather than making it their permanent home base. The young of wild Barn Owls also disperse in much the same way, wild adults often leave the breeding site and use a different roost, although come springtime they are generally back again. In instances where one or both of the adults die during the winter their offspring will tend to use the traditional nest site and thus a good site may be used for a hundred years or more. Whether our released owls show the same tendency remains to be seen.

At three of the sites the breeding adults failed to return soon after the release. Although unfortunate, all was not lost. Five out of the six owlets in this situation were successfully released - as they learned to fly. In fact this technique can be used successfully - Owlets can be placed in a barn nestbox and not shut in at all, they are fed and disperse gradually as they learn to fly rather than when wire netting is removed. This 'young clutch' method of release may in fact prove more often successful than the 'long term' method used previously. Barn Owls and are particularly susceptible to stress and are easily frightened. When adult owls are shut in a barn they quickly establish a routine to their lives - waking time - feeding place - eating method - bathing routine - regular flight paths - conditioned aversive reactions - roosting place - roosting time etc. which will tend to be repeated every twenty four hours just as wild owls do. Barn Owls don't seem to have the romantic ideas about freedom that we do (freedom from starvation

is far more important), to release an adult owl is actually to disturb it. When outside the barn for the first time the adult owl will be under additional stress, the individual's ability to cope with this varies a great deal. One advantage with the 'young clutch' method is that the owls are not subject to this sudden change, instead the speed of their release is governed only by the rate at which they become more mobile. Everything except their own development and the changing seasons remains the same.

In addition to the six Long Term releases for '87, we have arranged five Young Clutch releases. The owlets will be bred here at Waterleat and delivered to the sites at five weeks old. Subject to the success of my own breeding pairs these young clutch releases will be at Calstock, Coryton, Buckfast, Beaworthy and Rattery, bringing the total number of release sites for '87 to eleven.

Long Term Releases '87 Syon Abbey, South Brent

Work began in October '86 to prepare the barn which is part of the Abbey Farm. Harry Jones who organised the site and John the farmer put up a nest box and an outside aviary over the only entrance for the owls which were installed on the 24th of Nov. The female began laying on the 25th March '87 on the 13th April John counted nine eggs! a very large clutch by Barn Owl standards. The barn is very close to the A38 with its rough grass verges, in previous years we have avoided such release sites but thought that this site was worth a try. Whilst many Barn Owls have been killed on that stretch of the A38 one wild one lived at Syon Abbey for several years.

Widworthy

This is another unusual release site - the attic of a thatched cottage. Martin and Glenys received their pair of owls on 24th Jan '87. The attic was equipped with a nest box and an outside aviary through which the owls have to be fed. The area is of pasture, hedgerows and woodland edge - a very idyllic setting. On March 22nd there were four eggs laid on the floor directly above the bedroom! This is the first time that I've known owls to not use the box provided and cause additional problems - we can't inspect the nest without the female flying off it.

Woodland, Ashburton

The pair of owls here have the use of the whole of a very large stone barn with traditional owl holes at both ends. Mr + Mrs Roberts have put outside aviaries over both holes and intend to remove only the fronts of the aviaries so that the perch remains - this may mean that the owls are less disturbed by the release. On March 28th there were two eggs in the box the first of which is due to hatch on 26th April. The area is of small pasture fields and hedger with small areas of rough grass nearby.

Dunsford

The habitat surrounding this site is ideal for Barn Owls with fallow fields and very young tree plantations with lots of rough grass. Elizabeth and family received their pair on 1st March '87 and by the 5th April the first egg was laid, this should hatch on the 6th of May. Part of the loft of a barn has been partitioned off for the owls with an aviary over one of the two entrances.

Throwleigh

Situated on the N.W. edge of Dartmoor in the grounds of a lovely old house the owls were installed in the loft of a stone barn. Mr + Mrs Palmer had provided a nest box and outside aviary and received their pair on Feb. 22nd '87. The area is of pasture with quite a lot of trees and a Devon Trust for Nature Conservation reserve nearby. On Easter Sunday Mr Palmer phoned to say that there were three eggs in the nest box - normal clutch size is five so the female is almost certainly still 'in lay'.

Morwenstow, N. Cornwall

Mac and William Barriball received their owls on March 1st '87. These were installed in one end of a very long stone barn with an aviary hung over the only entrance. The interior is very dark and high and should be ideal from the owls point of view. I was very doubtful about the sex of both these owls but need not have worried - Mac rang on the 16th April to say the owls have three eggs (much to our relief). The area is of pasture and hedgerows with areas of rough grass nearby. Small corners or strips of fields with rough grass vastly increase the small mammal population.

As you know, this scheme does not yet receive any grant aid and is run on a shoestring with the help of friends and relatives. Donations of wire netting timber and teachefts are always useful. The most expensive part of running the scheme is vehicle running costs - donations towards this are very ~~and~~ welcome. If you know of any free photocopying available please let us know. Our annual Barn Owl Jumble Sale raised £75 - many thanks to all those involved and to those of you who have given donations.

Special Thanks to:- Fran for her love and support

Heather Buzwell, for all her help

Eric Worsley, for help with transport

Joanna Vinson (Bird of Prey Rescue Centre) for all her help

Geraldine Mills, for the supply of Owl Food

Rodger Swinfen, (B.T.O.) for ringing all the owls

Release Volunteers - last years plus, Harry Jones + John, Martin

+ Glenys Halliwell, Mr + Mrs Roberts, Elizabeth Ruiz + family, Mr + Mrs

Palmer, Mac + William Barriball, Brother Nicholas, Barbara Berkley,

Jennie Hale, Jenny Neal, Peter Smerdon.

Also - Avis and Muzz Murray, and our mums.

DEVON BARN OWL BREEDING AND RELEASE SCHEME

"Dartmoor the Threatened Wilderness" is a series of four programmes to be screened on CHANNEL 4 weekly. The Barn Owl Scheme is included in the first one which will be on THURSDAY JUNE 4th at 8 PM.

P.S. 28-4-87

Today at the request of a landowner, via the Nature Conservancy Council, we visited a Barn Owl roost site in Cornwall. This barn is to be demolished for "economic reasons". The landowner asked us to see him to suggest ways in which he could encourage the Barn Owls to stay around - obviously the first thing that we suggested was that the building and the habitat be preserved, however, this is not to be. Economics is a very strong motivator.

One of the long term objectives of this project (The Devon Barn Owl Breeding and Release Scheme) is to establish a charitable trust to enable us to maintain suitable buildings and habitat for Barn Owls, also indirectly benefitting other kinds of wildlife.

Forming a charitable trust requires a great deal of work as we know next to nothing about it. We have been told we would need an accountant and a solicitor just to start. If anyone out there can help and has an idea of how we can go about this, or maybe a friend that would be interested in giving us a hand, please, let us know. help with this would be much appreciated as most of our energy goes into the breeding and release work.

Maybe next time that someone comes to us with an economic reason for destroying a Barn Owl's home we could provide more practical help.

P.P.S. The first young clutch release is now underway. Four outlets ranging in age from four to six weeks were installed in a stone barn at Cabstock today. As this is our first young clutch release to date we await developments eagerly.

P.P.P.S. Tell your friends and neighbours Release Scheme leaflets, "information WANTED" posters and Nestbox info. sheets are available. Please send a large S.A.E.