

Issue Number 20



FEEDBACK

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The Barn Owl Trust, Waterleat, Ashburton, Devon TQ13 7HU (01364) 653026 Registered Charity: No: 299 835



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- ◆ Tenth Anniversary Round-Up
- ◆ Radio Tracking ◆ Rodenticides
- ◆ Eagle Owls ◆ New Projects ◆ New People...

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

Barn Owl Trust News

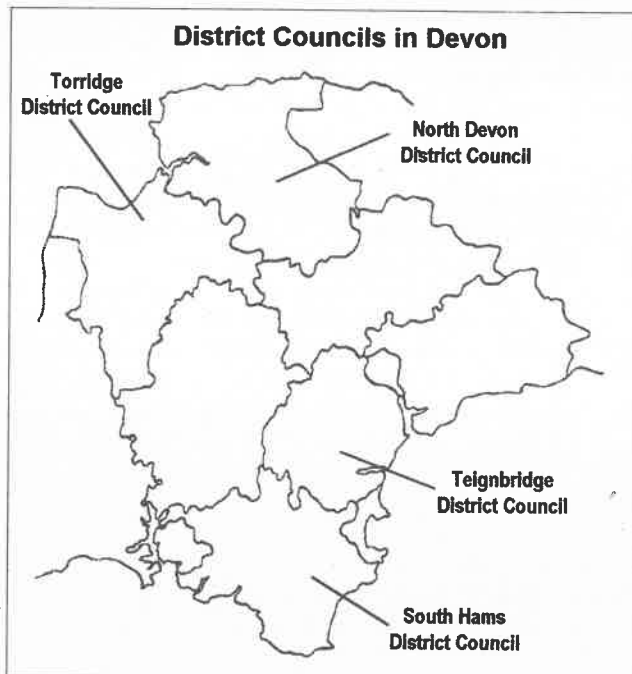
Teignbridge Barn Owl Scheme Begins

A scheme to conserve and enhance remaining Barn Owl sites in the Teignbridge district of Devon started on 1st October 1998. The Trust has joined forces with Teignbridge District Council to stabilise and encourage the expansion of the Barn Owl population.

Devon's Barn Owl population has declined by an estimated 70%. Since 1993 there have been just nine breeding sites recorded in Teignbridge district. The scheme aims to enhance the suitability of occupied Barn Owl sites, thereby increasing the productivity of the birds and the spread of offspring.

With Dartmoor on one side, the sea on the other and main roads running through the district, Barn Owls in Teignbridge face some serious challenges when they disperse from their natal sites.

Landowners at recorded breeding sites are being contacted by the Trust and invited to participate in the scheme. A three-stage package of measures will be applied to sites over a three-year period.



Teignbridge District Council has a good record in Barn Owl conservation, having previously supported the work of the Trust in the early 1990s with grants towards the Barn Conversion Research Project and the production of the 'Barn Owls on Site' booklet.

Peregrines Saved

Trust volunteer Simon Bishop was recently called upon to save a peregrine falcon chick - and found himself taking an unexpected ride on a fire engine's hydraulic platform!

The chick had fallen from its nest in a church tower in central Exeter while attempting its first flight. The RSPB, RSPCA and DWT were all unable to respond, but Simon was alerted and hurried to the scene. He was raised up 150ft on the platform to return the chick to its nest.

A crowd of some 100 local people applauded as the bird, confused but otherwise healthy, was placed back on its ledge and Simon returned safely to Earth. Modest Simon said: "The view from up there is brilliant!" Well done, Simon.

New Projects Underway

North Devon District Council's Biodiversity Action Group is currently producing a Biodiversity Action Plan for the district. NDDC has given the Barn Owl Trust a grant of £750 towards the analysis of Barn Owl data in the district and to assist with the production and costing of a site enhancement proposal. We hope to begin the

scheme in the Autumn of 1999. The Devon Wildlife Trust has given the Trust a grant towards the analysis of Barn Owl data in the Torridge district. Torridge, in North Devon, is a stronghold for the Barn Owl in the county. We are also drawing up a site enhancement proposal and working out the cost of implementing it within the district.

New Birdroom

The Trust has raised enough money to replace its ageing birdroom thanks to major donations from the Panton Trust, the Animal Defence Trust and the Marchig Trust.

The birdroom, where injured birds are cared for and kept under

observation while they recuperate, has been housed in a converted caravan. This has become too dilapidated to make repair economically viable.

A new bird-room will now be erected as soon as possible,

allowing us to give injured wild birds the best possible care before hopefully being returned to their natural habitat.

Thank you to all the bodies that have made this possible. Your donations are greatly appreciated.

The Rise and Fall of a Local Barn Owl Population

A five year study of Barn Owls by the Trust in one area of the South Hams has shown some alarming fluctuations in the local population. The five kilometre square of rolling farmland and woodland is relatively typical of habitat within the district. What sets this area apart is that during the 1990s it has proved to be the main stronghold of the Barn Owl in the South Hams.

As you can see from the table, in 1993 there were two known breeding sites within the square (A & B). Nestboxes were erected at sites D & E to provide suitable breeding sites. These were used in 1994, 95 and 96 along with sites A & C.

Breeding peaked in the area in 1996 with site F being recorded as producing young for the first time, bringing the total of breeding sites to five and the number of owlets produced to 15+.

When we made our site visits in the Summer of 1997 we were extremely disappointed to find that at four of the 1996 breeding sites the female birds had disappeared. Presumably they failed to make it through the winter, although why four different females from four different sites should all disappear during the same period remains a mystery. At site A we controlled (caught alive) a male Barn Owl that had been ringed in 1989 and was the offspring of birds released

by the Trust some 5 or 6 miles away. It is likely that this male had been at site A since leaving its natal site in 89. In July 1997 another male Barn Owl was caught at site C and fitted with a BTO ring. Sites D & E had evidence of roosting and moulting by male Barn Owls; these could have been further individuals or possibly birds from sites A or C. Site F bred in 1997 producing two young and site G produced young for the first time. February 1998 found the male from site C dead on the road and a visit later in the year to check breeding status revealed no recent signs of occupation by Barn Owls.

Prolonged periods of wet weather during the breeding season are thought to have affected site F,

Sites	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1993	B	B	U		A		
1994	B	U	B	B	B		
1995	B	U	B	B	B		
1996	B	R	B	B	B	B	
1997	M	A	M	M	M	B	B
1998	R	A	A	R	B	B	B

KEY

B	Breeding
R	Roosting
M	Male present
A	Absent
U	Unconfirmed
Blank	No information - presume absent

where the owls hatched three owlets but failed to rear any of them, and site G, where four young hatched but only one survived to fledging. The most positive news from the area in 1998 was that breeding occurred at site E, where a new female had taken up residence and reared two owlets to fledging. She turned out to be one of the two youngsters hatched at site F in 1997.

Having monitored the birds in this area for five years we can see the fluctuations that have affected the population. Weather has almost certainly had a significant affect during the breeding period over the last two years. It is worth noting that all of the breeding that has taken place in the area (with the exception of site B in 1993) has taken place in man-made sites, nestboxes.

Whilst we are unable to control the weather or to explain the loss of four breeding females in one period, we are working to conserve and enhance the remaining population in the area. The investment of resources into the South Hams Barn Owl Scheme is enabling us to spend time at Barn Owl sites, to remove hazards and to advise landowners on establishing good habitat thereby providing more food for the birds.

Frances Ramsden

South Hams Barn Owl Scheme Update

The first year of the South Hams project is just coming to an end. The work is divided into 3 stages: over the past year stage 1 work has been carried out at 22 of the 32 sites. Visits during the breeding seasons were undertaken to all 22 and stage 2 work was completed at 4 of these. The remaining 18 will be visited again during the autumn. In addition, 10 new sites are being targeted for enhancement work in the future.

All of the stage 1 work and some of the stage 2 was carried out by Steve Panks. Su Meekins has now taken on responsibility for the scheme.

The only significant problem encountered so far has been with the water floats - the wooden frames with plastic mesh designed to sit in water-troughs and prevent birds from drowning. Despite extensive testing prior to use some

have sunk and some have been wrecked by inquisitive cattle! Top research scientists (David and Su!) are even now investigating new, safe and effective water floats that will actually float in water. We'll keep you posted on this and all other aspects of the project as it progresses over the next couple of years.

Read about the Teignbridge Barn Owl Scheme on page 3.

Spanish Students

We are two Spanish students (Carmen Estevez and Yago Miranda) of Environmental Management from Seville. We came here to do a study of the behaviour and the habitat of the Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) through radio-tracking in Devonshire. We have done a similar study in South Spain before and in this way we can compare the behaviour in the two countries and look at the effects of the different environment on the species.

Methods

The first thing that we had to do was to catch the Barn Owls in order to put a transmitter, of small weight and size, on their tails. We had chosen this kind of transmitter because the Barn Owls will lose it when they moult the two central



feathers of the tail. Sometimes the weight of the transmitter can accelerate the moult, but this does not cause problems in the behaviour of the birds.

We use aerials and receivers to follow the signals that the transmitter produces. We can pick up the broadcast of the transmitter from a distance of three kilometres and from two positions we can fix the position of the parent birds as they hunt.

By recording this on a map the intersection will position the bird.

We use CB radios to communicate with each other whilst tracking. The positions from which we follow the signals must be distant enough so as not to affect the behaviour of the Barn Owls.

Problems

We encountered various problems. The principal difficulty that we found was the weather; we lost a lot of nights because the Barn Owls were not hunting in the rain. Also, the topography made it difficult at times to continue tracking. In Spain we did not have problems with the weather and we have not got so many hills and for

that reason it is much easier to follow the signal.

Results

The principal differences that we found in Barn Owl behaviour between our two countries is that in England the Barn Owls use a bigger area to hunt in the breeding period, and they have longer activity periods. This is presumably due to the lack of availability of food compared to Spain. In Spain the ground is less ploughed than in England, which allows the better development of the populations of micro-mammals that make up the birds' diet.

Another difference that we have found is that in Spain the Barn Owls spend a lot of time perched on a post waiting for the prey to pass in front of them whereas in England the owls hunt on the wing.

Thanks

The study was done with three Barn Owls and we spent one and a half months doing it. We are very grateful for the help that the Barn Owl Trust have given us; without this help we could never have undertaken the study.

We appreciate the affection and the friendship that everyone at the Trust has shown us. We have been welcomed into the family and they go out of their way to make sure everything goes correctly.

We have been very impressed by the work that the Barn Owl Trust have been doing during the last ten years in England; promoting the conservation of the Barn Owls and their habitats. They set an example to follow. All of us must be grateful for the work that is being done by this organisation.

Thank you very much for everything.

Carmen Estevez
and Yago Miranda



Photos: Simon Bishop

A Local Barn Owl Survey

Trust volunteer Simon Bishop, a postman by profession, has been carrying out fieldwork near his home in eastern Devon. Here he writes about his findings.

During May and June this year I spent 2 afternoons a week surveying a 5km grid square North West of Exeter. It was hard work, particularly after an early morning start and a full shift delivering the mail, but most enjoyable. Some visits were carried out in conjunction with Martin Davies, Countryside Project Officer with the Exeter City Council Department of Leisure & Tourism.

Most farmers are very co-operative; so many of them say things like, 'We used to have Barn Owls around here'. There were just a couple of farmers who weren't keen on having someone rooting around on their land. At one farm I was confronted by a farmer who didn't know his son had given me permission to be there. Apart from that, it was plain sailing!

Results

I visited a total of 48 sites and checked 120 barns for signs of Barn Owls. This procedure means searching the sites for droppings,

pellets, feathers and nest debris and checking boxes if present.

Of the 48 locations visited, none had breeding Barn Owls this year. 3 farm sites were used for roosting (2 by the same pair which failed to breed). 4 others were occasionally visited by Barn Owls; some pellets found were more than a year old.

At one site breeding took place last year and 4 young were raised. We expected to find breeding again this year but, although there was a scrape, there were no eggs.

In the whole grid square a total of 11 boxes had been erected by the

Barn Owl Trust and Exeter City Council. Of these, 3 were being used. I erected one more box, but there is tremendous scope for more boxes to be put up in the area.

The results are pretty disappointing for a part of Devon that has historically supported a good Barn Owl population. The river Exe runs through the area and there are meadows of rough grass along its banks which make good Barn Owl habitat. It will be interesting to re-check the sites visited in a few years to see what changes occur.

Simon Bishop



Photo: Kevin Keatey

The Trust Goes Hi-Tech

In Feedback 18 Deborah Lang wrote about her Summer job with the Trust. This year, after graduating from Bristol University with a degree in Zoology, she returned to help with data entry.

I came back to the Trust for six weeks to start transferring Barn Owl records onto the new database. Once all the data is on the computer, many exciting and useful things can be done with it. The Trust is currently celebrating its tenth anniversary, so you can imagine how much data has been accumulated over the years. The database allows easy access to this data by running a query. In doing

this, specific areas of interest can be selected and then modified to produce a table of all the relevant information. The new database will be a particularly powerful tool for research, as the history of many sites is known and has been recorded (although sometimes... often... it would be easier to plug into David, as more information is stored in his head than on paper!).

Another side to my work is using a new mapping programme called DMap. If a string of Ordnance Survey grid references denoting, for example, a boundary is entered, the programme can plot them on the screen. Then the really clever

bit happens. If the database is queried for a certain area or subject, the information output can be jiggled about in such a way that DMap can recognise it. So a distribution map can be plotted showing all the relevant data for a specific area.

The map can be customised to plot points in any shape, size or colour, and boundaries can be added or removed at will. So, for example, to research the effects of major roads on Barn Owl breeding sites, the roads can be added to the map and the breeding sites plotted. Clever stuff!

Deborah Lang

Barn-Storming Barn Owl Barn Dance!

The Tenth Anniversary Ceilidh - the Barn Owl Barn Dance - took place on Saturday 12th September at Scoriton Village Hall, near Buckfastleigh.

Over one hundred people squeezed into the hall for a spirited evening of music, food, song and dance. Mrs. Crotty's Ceilidh Band was on top form, with caller Paddy Reardon directing and cajoling eager (but not necessarily competent) dancers in the fine art of manoeuvring to music

without trampling too many toes. In between the dances, the band sang and played folk tunes, providing the perfect accompaniment to the eating and talking.

The new village hall at Scoriton made a superb venue, with places to sit and space to dance, plus a well-appointed kitchen and a full range of facilities. A few people did have a hard time finding it - but it was certainly worth the effort!

What with the draw and the bar, the Trust made a good profit on the evening - which just goes to show how enjoying yourself can be good for the environment.

Thanks to everyone who helped to make it happen - Frances, Sandra, Barbara, Judy, Margaret, Jasmin and especially Jacob and Ivan, who between them ran the soft-drinks bar all evening.

Philip Knowling

↳where rocks are not available, eyries of birds of prey or niches on the ground are used.

Population Density

Depending on the availability of breeding sites and food the population density can be fairly high. In the Franconian Jurassic 7 breeding pairs could be counted in 100 square kilometres with distances between breeding sites of 1.8 and 2.8 kilometres.

Consequently, its territory encompasses about 500 to 3000 hectares.

Nutrition

The Eagle Owl is a "prey opportunist"; the most common species in a given area will predominate in its prey list. In Northern Bavaria, for instance, hedgehogs, feral doves, carrion crows and all kinds of mice are commonly caught. Buzzards, long-eared owls, mallards, young hares and foxes and even herons have been found.

Breeding Biology

Eagle Owls usually begin laying and hatching in the middle of March. The clutch amounts to between 2 and 4 eggs and is brooded in about 34 days. The young fledge at 9 weeks, but leave the nest much earlier (if the breeding site is not too high and exposed) and hide in the vicinity. The young are provided for by the adults for another three months until they become independent and leave the parental territory in September or October. The young disperse an average of 40 kilometres. However, an exceptional distance of 315

kilometres has been recorded.

Mortality

In the first year after leaving the nest the mortality rate is about 46%, in the following years about 23%. The mortality of released Eagle Owls is about twice as high. In the wild they will live to about 20 years, in captivity 28 to 34 years; an age of 68 has been recorded.

Conservation & Management

Breeding sites should be guarded against unintentional human disturbances such as climbing, hiking etc. and temporarily closed. Dangerous power lines with erected insulators should be converted into hanging insulators or provided with perches, as has been done by some energy suppliers in Germany. In Upper Franconia, for example, some 17.000 power lines have been made safe.

Road casualties are also a serious problem. If an adult dies while the young are dependent they will starve. Illegal pursuit should be punished severely, as the shooting of owls and birds of prey which conflict with human interests still seems to be regarded as a trifling offence. Further measures of protection might include the clearing of overgrown breeding sites which cannot be occupied anymore.

Jan Ebert

A bibliography to accompany this paper is available from the BOT - please send an SAE.



Safer Labelling Campaign

Tony Jacques writes about his campaign for the safer labelling of rodenticides.

It is incredible to think that, in these times of so-called 'open government' and the information age, precious Barn Owls could perish through lack of simple, clear product labelling. Well, unfortunately it is true.

I am a part-time gamekeeper. Besides producing a surplus of pheasants and partridges, the job involves managing the countryside for all wildlife. Habitat improvement and maintenance are the key and coppicing woodland, hedgelaying, treeplanting and putting in new ponds all encourage a diversity of creatures.

When I was keeping a small shoot in East Sussex a couple of years back, I was delighted to see a pair of Barn Owls occasionally visiting the feed rides, seemingly hunting on the edge of their territory.

Rats

One problem that virtually everyone in rural areas currently suffers from is ever-increasing rat numbers. Feeding wheat on straw certainly benefits not only pheasants and all seed eating birds in wintertime, but also attracts armies of rodents. The keeper is responsible for keeping these pests under control in the outlying areas, so I was particularly pleased to enlist the help of local Barn Owls.

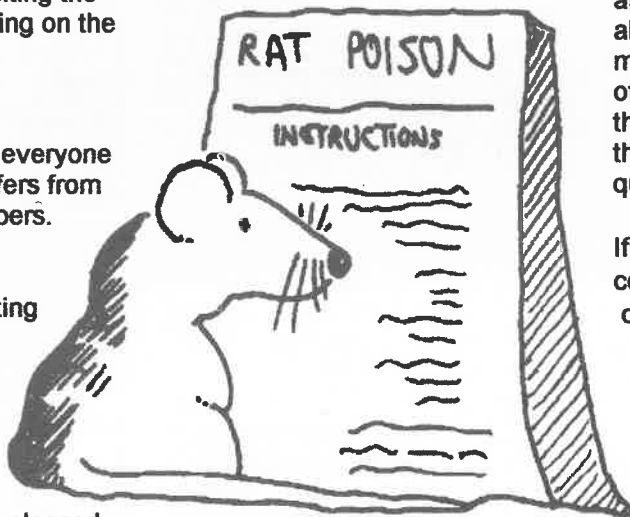
One of the main offensive weapons employed against '*Rattus Norvegicus*' was an approved outdoor rodenticide. I had always presumed that modern rat poisons were basically safe to birds, certainly the pheasants occasionally pick up the odd few treated grains with no ill effects, so I was shocked to learn from a falconer at a country show that modern rodenticides are

highly toxic to both owls and raptors.

After checking with both the Game Conservancy and the Barn Owl Trust, this was confirmed.

The Barn Owl Trust supplies an excellent fact sheet (leaflet No 21), which shows that the first generation products are less dangerous, but with the newer 'high tech' products, an owl picking up just one drowsy mouse or rat can take a lethal dose.

The core problem is there is no statutory requirement for manufacturers to state on the packaging what generation products they are selling, or the potential hazards to other species. A quick check on various agricultural merchants' shelves showed that none of these details are currently displayed on product packaging.



The practical difficulty for any purchaser, faced with the mind boggling list of brands and scientific names, is the task of trying to work out the safest option. This means that responsible farmers, game and river keepers, pest controllers and horse owners (and anyone else who has to keep rats down) could inadvertently be damaging an endangered species just through lack of information.

Many people think that covering up the poison or laying it in a drainpipe will keep it safe, not realising that the poisoned rodent takes 4-6 days to die and will carry the poison out into the open within its body.

Lobbying

With this sad situation in mind, I have tried over the last eighteen months, via both my previous and current MPs, to get MAFF to sort this simple problem out.

To date the previous and current administrations have refused to even consider directing the companies to clearly label rodenticides, but this is where you, as concerned readers, come in. Please write, or even better visit your Members of Parliament at their surgeries, and ask them to raise the matter with the ministry responsible.

What we would like is to be granted an adjournment debate, which would allow the MP involved to raise the matter with the minister on the floor of the Commons. This would bring the situation out into the open, but the more pressure via parliamentary questions or similar the better.

If you need any facts and figures to compile your letter drop me a line c/o Feedback.

A fellow gamekeeper and first rate conservationist said to me that the problem is that Barn Owls don't vote. Well people do, so PLEASE take a few moments and do something practical by putting pen to paper or talking to your MP.

This is an easily avoidable situation, but time is not on our side. We can persuade the powers that be to do something positive to protect our dwindling Barn Owl numbers and between us we really can make a difference - if we act now!

Tony Jacques

Bits and Pieces



Around the World

We have Friends, adoptees, expert contacts etc. all around the world. The Trust's message has now reached as far as the following countries:

Australia	Malawi
Austria	Netherlands
Belgium	New Zealand
Canada	Norway
Channel Islands	Saudi Arabia
Denmark	Senegal
Eire	Singapore
Falkland Islands	Spain
France	Sweden
Germany	Switzerland
Hong Kong	Trinidad &
India	Tobago
Indonesia	Turkey
Italy	USA
Japan	West Indies
Luxembourg	Yugoslavia

Owl Barn Catalogue

Included with this mailing of Feedback is the Owl Barn gift catalogue. This is a first for the Trust - we decided to do it for several reasons.

Firstly, the company has contributed to the cost of this mailing which means we can spend more of our funds on conservation rather than postage.

Secondly, the catalogue includes our very own tenth anniversary book, "A Wisdom of Owls". And thirdly, the company may carry other items from the Barn Owl Trust

sales goods leaflet, which would bring our name to a wider audience and perhaps generate a little more income for us to plough back into our work.

We also thought that as owl fans you might be interested to see the range of owly goodies in the catalogue. Don't forget to mention the Trust when you order.

PS Just in case you're worried you might find yourself on endless mailing lists, be assured that we never pass on names and addresses without specific consent.

Where did farmers scare away owls by walking round their fields naked?

This Christmas give the ultimate owl book...

A Wisdom of Owls

Standard edition £25 + £4.50 special delivery
Luxury edition £43.50 + £4.50 special delivery

Order now from the Barn Owl Trust



Scotch Owl - Experts at Odds



Our item about the Scotch Owl in Feedback 19 brought responses from several noted experts. It's clear that, when it comes to this rare bird, controversy reigns. Here are extracts from the nature notes of various connoisseurs.

The correct Latin name - *Tightus Amberii*. Commonly (but erroneously) associated with water - actually reacts much better to icy conditions. Call is reminiscent of

'Hoots Mon'. Flight - often wavering and erratic. Mainly solitary but can be seen in pairs, particularly late at night. Rarely seen at dawn, prefers dusk and dark. Seen in daylight only on special occasions such as weddings and wakes.

Rare because egg-collectors raid the nests for the famous 'Scotch egg'. This egg, unique in the bird kingdom, has a special coating to protect it from most natural disasters (including being eaten).

Peter Stafford

In Scotland the Scotch Owl and Barn Owl are considered to be one and the same. Latin name comes

from Tyto (Tight) and Alba (the old name for Scotland). Common name of Screech Owl comes from the bird's habit of settling on thistles in the dark.

Some experts contend that the Scotch Owl was a separate subspecies which was driven to extinction by the eating of Scotch (or Scotch Owl) eggs.

NOTE: Perhaps the Barn Owl Trust would be prepared to fund a research project to study this fascinating subject - to include entertaining expenses, of course!

Rob Hamar

(Ed: only if we can come too)

Thanks and Things

Thank you to everyone who has supported the Trust with donations of time, money and energy over the last six months. We are especially grateful to the volunteers and staff who have worked so hard to support the Trust over the years and to those of you who have made a special effort for the Trust's tenth anniversary. It was great to see all those of you who joined us for the ceilidh.

Margaret and Derrick Crocker have held a plant sale and two garden open days in aid of the Trust this



year. They have also helped out with office maintenance, the sponsored walk, packing newsletters and multitudinous other tasks.

Wildlife illustrator Neil Patey has collected donations for the Trust at each of his exhibitions in South Devon. Mrs Allery couldn't make it to the Ceilidh but sent a selection of M&S vouchers for draw prizes. Mrs Ford of Exeter read that we needed gloves in the last issue of Feedback and appeared with a selection at our stand at the Royal Cornwall Show - it was very nice to meet her. Peter Chapman donated a heavy duty tripod and Janet Watts found us some recycled office furniture including some very good chairs. Thank you all.

We are still delighted to receive used C4 and C5 envelopes and send grateful thanks to those of you collecting them for us; keep them coming, and the newspaper cuttings, too, please.

As always, in true Barn Owl Trust tradition, to save us money and to recycle and reuse unwanted items we are hoping that someone out there might find some of the following items lying around in their garage or attic - be assured we can put them to good use:

Band saw
Lockable filing cabinet
Tripod and cassette tapes for a Sharp VL C73EA video camera
Crow bar
Post driver
35mm camera and lenses
Roof rack suitable for ladder to fit car with a gutter
An additional copy of *Barn Owls, Predator - Prey Relationships and Conservation* by I Taylor 1994 (an extra one we can lend without losing the office copy)

Extra rakes, rechargeable torches buckets, washing up bowls (we use them for owl baths) and measuring tapes are always useful, too.

Thank you

Tail Piece



Fossil records show that Barn Owls have existed on Earth for more than 2 million years. During that time they've seen the emergence of a new and rapidly developing species - Homo sapiens.

For many centuries Barn Owls benefited from the advances of this 2-legged creature. As woodland was cleared for farming and shelters created, Barn Owls thrived alongside humans.

The use of fire, the development of tools and the creation of the wheel were all indications that Homo sapiens, unlike most other species, had the ability to manipulate its environment.

In evolutionary terms, humans have only been on the planet for the blink

of an eye, but as our history shows, we have changed the world irrevocably. We have created deserts where there once were fertile plains and cities of concrete where there were bountiful forests. Entire species have disappeared, often unnoticed, in the course of our progress.

Human beings are not only the species most able to manipulate their environment, they are the most able to obliterate it and each other. War and the resultant destruction have followed the development of the human race like a dog on a lead.

The dawning of an awareness of human rights and environmental issues are signs that there is hope for both the planet and its species.

Let us hope that, after 50,000 years of existence, we Homo sapiens can come to the realisation that we cannot survive in isolation.

We are a part of the natural world, not independent of it, and in order to preserve our own species we must conserve our environment.

The Barn Owl Trust and its ten years of dedicated species conservation is just a trickle in the waterfall of awareness, but we all know that enough trickles together can create a flood - and a flood can change the course of history.

*Together we can make
a world of difference.*

Thank You Frances Ramsden