

DEVON BARN
BREEDING
AND RELEASE
SCHEME



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FEEDBACK issue 3

In this our third annual newsletter we hope to bring you up to date with the achievements of the scheme over the past twelve months. Please bear in mind as you read this that it was typed by a very inexperienced typist, with just two fingers, so it is full of mistakes which hopefully don't make it too unreadable!

During 1987 we released Barn Owls from 11 sites, 6 Long term and 5 Young Clutch releases bringing the total number of Barn Owls we have released to 96 from 19 sites. We have another 12 release sites all over Devon set up for 1988. Long term releases at Cullumpton, Buckfastleigh, Stoke Gabriel, Bicton, Tawstock and Holsworthy and Young Clutch releases at Cullumpton, Beaworthy, Buckfastleigh, Yealmpton, Instow and Ashburton.

We have a continuous stream of inquiries and an ever growing list of potential release volunteers and have now reached the point where we have formed a group of Trustees and submitted an application for Charitable Trust status to the Charities Commission, this is to allow us to raise funds and apply for grants to enable us to ensure the continuation and expansion of the scheme. Anyone wanting to know more about this please get in touch with us.

We are having our annual fund raising event, a JUMBLE SALE in Ashburton Ambulance hall, 10.30am Saturday 19th March so if you are close enough to let us have some jumble or to come along and help or support us please do.

Although the main activity of this scheme is to boost Devon's dwindling Barn Owl population, it is by no means our only interest. Far more important in the long term is a restoration of the balance between man and the earth. The "man made" threats to our environment are, when contemplated, so vast, that they can make an individual feel quite impotent and incapable of action. Acid rain, the destruction of the ozone layer and the tropical rain forest's, the daily extinction of species of plant and animal life, the growing pollution of the sea's and the land, the nuclear threat etc. etc. are all such immense problems and make the future for our planet look extremely bleak. We may feel that what ever we do, most if not all of these things are inevitable, however we can THINK GLOBALLY AND ACT LOCALLY. Anything an individual can do whether planting a tree or cutting down your amount of household waste can reduce the pressure on our eco-system.

RELEASE SITE "ROUND UP" FEBRUARY 1988.

No owls have been seen at our 1st (1985) release site near Holne, but one has been seen on several occasions over the last couple of years less than $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile away. We don't know if this is one of ours but it does seem significant that there were no Barn Owls within a mile of the site at the time of release or for some time previously. Yelverton was one of the two 1986 sites where the Owls stayed and bred again in 1987. 2 Owlets were rung there in July 87. In Jan 88 David and Sylvia saw an owl fly out of the release site and subsequently collected $\frac{1}{2}$ a carrier bag of pellets some of which were very fresh. The Owls at this site had not had any supplementary feeding from April 87 and therefore reared their young entirely on wild food. A point of interest is that near this release site, 1 mile approx, is a farm that hadn't had any Barn Owls for over 10 years, in Dec 87 David saw 2 Barn Owls 200 yds from this farm - could these be the young from the release site?

At the Modbury release site (1986) the Barn Owls were prolific breeders, they produced 9 young in the year of release, a clutch of 5 and one of 4. In June 87 four Owlets were rung there and in August they had another five so over the two years the original pair of Owls produced 18 Owlets, (they have always had some supplementary feeding at this site and that is probably responsible for the double broods and the large numbers of Owlets). Unfortunately, in Sept 87 the original female was found dead near the barn so we can only wonder what will happen in 1988. At the moment one Owl is being seen there occasionally.

Long Term Releases 1987.

At the South Brent release site the pair were released on the 29th May with 3 young in the nest. The release was perfect and all went well until the weather changed and the male was found dead 2 miles from the release site on the 8th June, (he was very thin and had probably got lost and starved). The female stayed at the site and reared her 3 Owlets. John and Harry stopped feeding in late August when the Owls hadn't taken any food for some time and "no Owls were seen" until Dec 87 when "something" flew out of the release site early one morning, on 2 occasions after this a Barn Owl was seen flying in a field nearby. In late Jan 88 a Barn Owl was seen a mile from the release site.

At Widworthy we waited for a 2nd brood and the female laid her eggs in a totally inaccessible part of the loft, as a result of this we couldn't get in to ring them or even check how many Owlets there were. The Owls were released on 13th August. The first Owlet was seen to fly out on 8th Sept. and three Owls were seen flying around at the end of September. The last Owl was seen there on 28th October, 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ months after release.

The Throwleigh release was on 9th June with 2 young in the nest, the parent birds both disappeared soon after release. The young were fed in the nestbox and took food until the beginning of August. Barn Owls have been seen and heard frequently since this release about a mile away and in Jan 88 a Barn Owl was seen by 2 people in

the lane leading to the release site.

Dunsford. We released the Owls here with 2 young in the nest on June 15th. No food was taken on the three following nights and we all felt very disappointed as it looked as if the Owls had left, then, suddenly, on 20th all the food had gone and there was an Owl in the box with the Owlets. Phew!!! Later the same evening an Owl was seen flying up and down the adjacent field and dropping into the grass as though hunting. The latest news is that there are definitely 2 Owls still around and taking some food. They are rung on different legs so it looks a possible breeding site for 1988.

At Woodland the Owls had one Owlet when they were released on May 31st. In mid June they were found to have a 2nd clutch of eggs in the nestbox and at the end of August 5 Owlets were rung. Since these Owlets have flown there have been several definite sightings of Barn Owls in and around the neighbouring farms and villages. One of the 2nd clutch of Owlets was found dead on the A38 near Marsh Mills, Plymouth on 17.11.87. It had been hit by a car but was in otherwise perfect condition, fit, plump, etc. 2 Owls were seen in mid Jan 88 flying around the farm and a single Owl is seen quite frequently. They are still taking between 5 - 10 chicks per night.

The Owls at Morwenstow had a first clutch in May which failed, in June they had a 2nd clutch of 6 eggs which resulted in them successfully rearing one Owlet, this was rung a week before the release at the end of August. Both the adult Owls came out of the barn on the night of release and spent a long time flying and perching close to it, which was a wonderful start, however both of them disappeared almost straight away and the Owlet was fed in the box. The cereal harvest was done a couple of days after the release and we thought it might be the abundance of wild food around that caused the Owls to stop taking the chicks provided. The Owlet was first seen out of the box on 21.9.87 but it too had stopped taking food 6 days later. There were no sightings at all until 19.11.87 when one was seen 300yds from the barn 2 hours after dusk. The last sightings were in December when an Owl was seen on 2 separate occasions within 200yds of the farm buildings.

1987 was the first year we tried "Young Clutch Releases", this is taking a clutch of Owlets at approx 4 weeks old and putting them into a nestbox where they are fed by the release volunteer, they leave the box as and when they learn to fly. This method of release has the advantage of being able to use buildings unsuitable for "long term" releases as there is no "Owl proofing" involved. Barn Owls can learn to hunt instinctively and don't need to be taught hunting skills by their parents so that Owlets released using this method can become self sufficient.

We had 5 Young Clutch Release sites in 1987, 4 in Devon and 1 in Cornwall. Calstock was the 1st of these, 4 Owlets were put into the box on 28.4.87. and the first one was seen flying about 4 weeks later, within about a week of leaving the box they all started to roost outside of the building and were thought to be in trees. They continued to take food for 10 weeks after leaving the box. Owls were last seen on the farm in December, 2 on the 29.12 and one on 31.12. One was heard shrieking at the beginning of February 88. It is thought that maybe they are using a derelict barn nearby.

At Coryton 3 Owlets were installed in June and the first was seen flying at dusk on 16.7.87. The last food was taken from the site on 5.9.87. 7 weeks after flying. In December there were various reports of Barn Owls being seen in and around the valley where they hadn't been seen before. There have been no definite sightings recently.

We placed 3 Owlets at the Buckfast site on 7th July, the food consumed dropped quite quickly after they began to fly but some food was being taken occasionally until 10.9.87. On the 28.10.87 one of these Owls was picked up on the A38 near Buckfast and taken by a travelling salesman to a bird of prey hospital in Weston Super Mare, it was found to be in good condition (plump, fit, etc.) except for a few damaged tail feathers and shock. The Owl was brought back to Devon on 15.11.87 and returned to the release site where it flew (strongly) straight out and off. It returned to feed and food is still being taken. On 13.12.87. another Owl from this release site was found dead on the A38 near South Brent. She had been totally independent for at least 3 months and was in perfect feather and not at all thin. She was found in the central reservation having probably been hit whilst hunting over the grass verges.

The Rattery release site had 4 Owlets placed on the 24.7.87. the 1st Owllet was seen outside the box on 11.8.87. The last time an Owl was seen near the release site was 16.10.87. but some food was still being taken until 20.11.87 although it fluctuated and dropped as the Owls learnt to hunt. On 19.12.87. a Barn Owl from this site was found dead on the M5 near Exeter approx 35 miles from the release site. It had been independent for at least a month and had obviously been supporting itself quite adequately. In mid December a Barn Owl was seen 2/3 fields away from the release site.

The Owlets at Ashburton were released from a nestbox in the end of a poultry shed so that they had no "indoor space" other than their box. We placed 5 Owlets here on 9.10.87 and the first one was found out of the box on 25.10.87 and by the end of October they were all out and flying around, the food being taken dropped off after the middle of November, the last time food was taken was two days after the last Owl was seen on 25.11.87.

To briefly sum up our Young Clutch Releases in 1987 we can say that the Owlets tend to stay at the release sites and take food until they achieve independence by learning to hunt which they do instinctively. The Owls which have been recovered from this year's Y.C. releases (3, 2 dead and 1 alive) had all been independent for some time and were all fit and healthy and quite competent hunters prior to being hit. The Owls surprisingly tended to roost away from the nestbox almost immediately (often we think in trees) returning for food. In wild Barn Owl nest sites and Long Term Releases, the adult Owls drive off the young when they reach independence and in Y.C.R. despite having no parental competition the young still disperse from the original nest site, some just short distances and some quite a long way. One thing apparent from several of this year's release sites is that Barn Owls can be around and not be seen. At some sites they have continued taking food long after the last sightings or they are suddenly seen after a long break, which just goes to show that you shouldn't presume that the Owls have gone because you don't see them.....

you could recycle - newspapers, stamps, silver foil, tin cans, vegetable peelings etc. can be composted.

Use organically produced and bio-degradable products.

Cut down on the amount of plastic, polystyrene and other inorganic products you buy.

Join your local nature conservation group and get involved in protecting your own immediate environment.

Think before you throw anything away, it might be useful to someone, try Oxfam, RSPCA NSPCC etc.

None of these ideas may appeal to you but if you are reading this then you presumably are aware of at least some of the threats to our "Fragile Earth" and can maybe find your own ways of relieving some of them. Good Luck ...

Many, many thanks to our release volunteers without whom there would be no scheme, also to all our supporters and helpers, thank you for your assistance and encouragement.

Special thanks to:-

Heather Buswell, Joanna Vinson, Terry Browse and Malcolm Goldby for their help and interest over the past year and especially for agreeing to be our trustee's.

Geraldine Mills for the supply of owl food and other help.

Keith Grant and Rodger Swinfen (B.T.O.) for ringing the owls.

Eric Worsley for help with our transport.

Also Avis and Muzz Murray and our Mums.

One of the nicest things about running a project like this is meeting such a lot of nice people - thank you all.

We have Release Scheme leaflets, "information WANTED" posters and nestbox info. sheets available for anyone who is interested, please ask them to send a large S.A.E. to help keep our costs down.

On March 25th 1988 David is giving his first public slide show and talk about the work of the scheme. 7.30pm at Coombeinteinghead village hall. Everyone is welcome.