

Barn Owl Literacy



Wings of Change Story

This is a story about owls, not the brown Tawny Owls which “twit-twoo”, but about Barn Owls which screech. Below you can see a picture of the farm where our story is set. Many years ago Barn Owls lived on most farms in Britain. On our farm there were three pairs of Barn Owls. One pair lived in the big, old barn, next to the farmhouse, one pair lived in the little barn up on the hill, and another pair lived in an old hollow tree.

There were so many Barn Owls on the farm because there was a plentiful supply of food for them. Barn Owls eat voles, shrews and mice which live in hedges and in fields of long grass amongst the wild flowers and beautiful butterflies. Voles live in long rough grassland in a spongy layer called the ‘litter layer’, where they can make tunnels and build nests. Shrews like the long grassland too as well as hedge rows and woodland. Mice live in a variety of habitats but many live in the same types as the voles and shrews. Many different wild animals and birds lived on the farm and there were farm animals too – pigs, sheep, cows, chickens, geese and farm-horses.



1940's Farm

The farm has small fields separated by hedgerows. There are areas of long, rough grassland, areas of woodland and areas for growing crops. The farm supports a wide range of wild animals and birds as well as the farm animals too - pigs, sheep, cows, chickens, geese and horses.

This is how the farm was around the time of the Second World War (1939-45). Really horrible things happened during the war and many people died. So many men went away to fight that there were not many farm workers left behind to work in the fields. Ships were not able to bring food to England because of the fighting which meant that during the war, and afterwards, food was in short supply. To make sure there was enough food for everyone, the government limited people to a certain amount of food every week; this was called ‘rationing’. After the war had ended food rationing continued and farming became more intensive as farmers were asked to produce more and more food.

Our Farmer Joe needed to increase his yield to help with the food supply, and to harvest all the wheat he had grown, he borrowed lots of money from the bank and bought a machine that had just been invented; a combine harvester. At the end of the summer when all the cereals were ready, instead of using the farm horses and all his friends from the village to gather his crop, he used his new combine harvester. He drove it up and down his fields, but they were very small, they weren't big enough for big machines to work in. He was only able to drive a little way and then he had to turn round.

When the farmer finished his harvest he borrowed more money from the bank so he could employ a man with a massive bulldozer to come and rip out some of the hedges. Then Farmer Joe ploughed up some of the long grass to make the cereal fields much bigger.

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The next year he was able to grow lots more wheat to make bread and cakes to feed people, but there were only two pairs of Barn Owls left on the farm because when the pair in the old hollow tree heard the bulldozer coming, they flew away in the middle of the day and couldn't come back because the tree had been burnt after it was felled.



1950's Farm

The farm has bigger fields and fewer hedgerows making it suitable for growing much larger crops of food.

The old hollow tree that was home to a pair of Barn Owls has been knocked down and burned.

After a few years Farmer Joe is asked to produce more meat. He decided to specialise and he sold his small herd of cows and his pigs and used the money to buy more sheep. Lots of people liked roast lamb and lamb chops so he thought it would be easy to sell his meat. Now there are two things you need to know about sheep; they nibble the grass right down to the ground and this extremely short grass is not a good habitat for the small mammals Barn Owls predate. Also sheep are really good at escaping from their fields and breaking down hedges to get out. The farmer needed to find a way to stop the sheep running away, so he borrowed more money from the bank and used it to pay for fencing and a flock of a hundred sheep. He put up a fence and removed some of the hedges. The fence went all the way around the wood, along the hedge and all the way up to the farmhouse, then back down the side of the valley. This was where he would keep his big flock of sheep. The sheep were delivered and started to graze the grass, wild flowers and plants so that after a few months all the long, rough grassland had gone. Now the farm had transformed into large fields with grass, intensively grazed by all the sheep. There were still two pairs of Barn Owls on the farm but something had changed. Most of the long grass and lots of the hedgerow had gone and so the owls were having trouble finding enough food. The two pairs survived, but they didn't breed as much.

1960's Farm

The farm has more hedgerows removed and a fence put up to create a large field for sheep to graze in.

All the long rough grassland disappears as it is grazed by sheep.



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Many years went by and one morning the postman delivered a letter to Farmer Joe which looked very important. It was a letter from the bank which had lent Joe all that money. The letter said;



Dear Mr Farmer Joe,

After the war you borrowed some money from us to buy a combine harvester, bulldoze the hedges, put up a fence and buy a flock of sheep. Then you started to repay the loan but you're not paying it back fast enough. We will need to discuss how you are going to pay our money back faster.

Yours faithfully,
The Bank.

Farmer Joe couldn't understand this – he was producing lots of wheat and lamb and he was selling it all every year, so where was the money? The farmer couldn't pay the loan back to the bank because all of the farms were producing so much food. The money that the farmers got for their wheat and lamb was getting less and less.

This is to do with something called 'supply and demand' and it's really easy to understand. If you want something a lot you will pay more money for it, than if you don't want it very much. The shops were all full of food and so the farmer got less money for what he sold.

The situation was very serious. If Farmer Joe couldn't pay off the loan he would have to sell the farm. What could he do? He worried a lot. Somehow he had to make more money so that he could pay the bank. Then he had an idea. Lots of people came to visit the countryside and so he decided to have people stay in his spare room and pay for bed and breakfast. He made a sign and put it at the bottom of his drive, but the money he began to make from people coming to stay at the farmhouse still wasn't enough to pay off the loan. Then he realised that he didn't need his barn near the farmhouse any more as he was keeping all his animal food in big black plastic bags in his fields by now. He decided to convert the barn into a holiday cottage. Visitors came to stay in this new cottage and paid the farmer lots of money which he gave to the bank. Joe was saved!

1970's Farm

The farm has very few hedgerows and large fields growing crops or being intensively grazed by sheep. The builders arrive to convert the farmyard barn into a holiday cottage to generate more income for Farmer Joe.



Everyone was happy, BUT there was only one pair of Barn Owls left on

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the farm. They were living up on the hill in the ruin of the isolated barn, hunting mainly over the old meadow with its lovely pond, stream, wild flowers and invertebrates.

Every year more and more people come to the countryside on holiday. They stay at hotels, on campsites, caravan parks and in holiday cottages. This means there are great numbers of people travelling around the country mostly by car, and the roads became incredibly busy. There are long traffic jams. Some people think that the best thing to do when there are too many vehicles on small roads is to build bigger roads!



Dear Mr Farmer Joe,

The roads are becoming more busy and congested and we need to build a larger road to cope with the extra traffic. A new road is to be built through your farm.

Yours faithfully,

The Road Building Department.

Farmer Joe is shocked "What?" said Farmer Joe, "Build a road through my farm? They can't do that, this is MY farm, I've worked here all my life, I was born here, my father was born here, and my family have been here for generations! They can't build a road through here. It's not allowed!"

However several months later he is woken up by a very deep, loud, rumbling noise. When he looks out of his bedroom window he sees them. Great big yellow diggers and bulldozers and they're coming towards the farm.

They reached the farm, broke down the fence and took away the hedges. They drove through the woods with the beautiful trees that were hundreds of years old and push them over. Many of the woodland animals were killed and the rest all fled as their habitat was being destroyed. The diggers went through the woods and into the old meadow where they dug up all the rough grassland with its wild flowers and invertebrates and dug deep into the ground. Then they diverted the stream through a big pipe that they buried under the ground and pushed soil over the top. The diggers went right across the farm moving soils and rocks until the new road was finished. They didn't just build a little country road, they built a dual carriageway. Eventually grass grew over the verges by the side of the dual carriageway and after a few years voles, shrews and mice came to live in the long rough grass.

In the spring time the Barn Owls living in the ruins of the isolated barn up on the hill, were breeding! They had three owlets which were white, fluffy and about ten centimetres tall. Barn Owl chicks need a good supply of food to make them grow into adults; each one needed four small mammals a night, which is the same amount as an adult Barn Owl. It was the male who had to find all this food when the owlets were small.

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Today's Farm

There are only one pair of Barn Owls left on the farm, nesting in the old isolated barn. The hedgerows and most of the rough grassland are gone. The whole farm is now terrible place for Barn Owls to live.

One evening as it started to get dark, the male Barn Owl flew out of the small hole at the end of the barn. He flew down across the short grass fields, past the holiday cottage, and began to fly backwards and forwards over the re-grown grass on the old meadow. After a while he heard a vole and so flew lower and lower, then with out a sound he swooped with his long legs dangling down, into the grass and grabbed the vole with his long claws. With the vole held in one foot he flew home and gave the food to the female to feed to the owlets. Straight away he flew back out again and quickly caught another small mammal. The next time when he flew out to hunt he went over to the grass verges alongside the dual carriageway and found even more small mammals in the long grass there. A little later on the male Barn Owl decided to try hunting on the other verge across the busy road. He began to fly across the road and then he was dead. Hit by a car.

This story can be continued. See the next page for two alternative endings.

Barn Owls today:

The whole farm is now a terrible place for the Barn Owls to live, and most farms today have no Barn Owls at all. There are three main reasons why Barn Owls have disappeared from the countryside in the UK;

- Most fields of long grass (rough grassland) have been ploughed up or grazed too much and lots of hedges have disappeared, so there are fewer habitats for the small mammals that Barn Owls feed on. The result = fewer Barn Owls breeding and more fatalities.
- Lots of old hollow trees have disappeared and lots of old barns have fallen down or been converted into homes for people, so there are fewer places for Barn Owls to live.
- Many Barn Owls are killed every year on Britain's major roads (estimated between 3000 and 5000 per year).

If we want to see more Barn Owls living in the wild then we need to conserve their habitat and look after our precious countryside. By doing little things like leaving set-aside land, letting rough grassland grow and putting up nest boxes in suitable places we can really make a difference to wild Barn Owls in the future.

You can find out more by visiting our web site www.barnowltrust.org.uk

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Alternative Ending - Version 1

Sadly the male Barn Owl is killed on the road.

Chloe Smith set out the next morning with her family to go shopping. Chloe had some of her birthday money to spend and was very excited! They were driving along the new road. Suddenly, "What was that?" said dad. "Quick stop the car" said mum, "I think it was an injured bird".

Taking care not to get run-over, dad walked back up the road and picked up the bird. From the car, mum could see that it was dead. "Oh no" she said, "What a shame". "Never mind" dad said as he put on his seat belt, "We'll take it home anyway, someone might want it". "I want it!" Chloe said "Please let me hold it." As dad drove off Chloe cradled the beautiful bird in her arms, "I hope it's just sleeping" she said.

Meanwhile, in the old isolated barn, the female Barn Owl was keeping a watchful eye on her three fluffy white owlets. She couldn't understand why her mate had not returned. The owlets were calling for food, "psh psh psh psh psh". They imagined the male flying in with a nice big vole. They waited and waited becoming more and more hungry. The female was hungry too. She didn't want to leave her owlets but eventually she flew off to escape their loud calling and to find some food.

For several nights she hunted, still hoping that her mate would return. She managed to find some food in the lovely old meadow with all its long grass and flowers. She started hunting along the hedges and found a few mice here and there. She did her very best to feed all the owlets but without any help there just wasn't enough food to go round. The owlets were very, very hungry, in fact they were starving. Their calls for food were not so loud now, they were growing weak. The female worked hard, she hunted all night long but it was not enough.

Unknown to the owls, the farmer had been keeping an eye on them and he too was concerned. He hadn't seen the male Barn Owl hunting for a few days and had noticed that the owls had gone very quiet. He telephoned the Barn Owl Trust to get some help. "Don't worry" the man said "I have got a licence to check Barn Owl nests and I'll come and see you tonight". It was now five days since the male Barn Owl had been killed. The Barn Owl man arrived just in time, the owlets were very weak and the adults nowhere to be seen. "Something is seriously wrong" he said to the farmer "These owlets are starving, we'd better feed them".

Every night the farmer placed some owl food in the barn until the owlets were grown and had all flown away. The Barn Owl man told the farmer about the reasons why Barn Owls had become so rare and together they worked out how to help the birds by creating more rough grassland and erecting nestboxes on the farm.

Barn Owls are still seen occasionally at the farm and if you are very, very lucky you may see one yourself. Chloe still wishes she could see one alive. Her dad buried the one they found dead and Chloe wrote a little poem and put it on the grave. She would gladly have given all her birthday money to help that owl get better but for him it was just too late.

THE END.

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Alternative Ending - Version 2

Sadly the male Barn Owl is killed on the road.

His body lay beside the road with cars and lorries whizzing past all day. Nobody noticed him. A big black crow named Corvus walked along the edge of the road eating insects which had been killed by the traffic. Corvus spotted the dead owl and walked over to investigate. He looked at it curiously. "Maybe this is food" he thought. Crows are very good at recycling. They make use of all kinds of things. Some of them will even build their nests with bits of rubbish. They live because other things die -- crows eat up dead animals and help to keep the countryside healthy.

Corvus stared at the dead Barn Owl. He was hungry alright, but something made him afraid. Birds like this are dangerous, "Corrrrr, corrrrr" he squawked loudly "Corrrrr danger, corrrrr danger". Corvus feared all birds of prey. He walked on up the road and found a dead rabbit. He recycled that with no trouble at all and just sat in a tree for the rest of the day. As it started to get dark, all the daytime birds flew off to roost. A big flock of rooks flew into the treetops to sleep.

Far below on the ground a lovely young fox had just woken up. Her name was Vixy and she was very keen on recycling too! She liked to hunt live food but wasn't very good at it. In fact, she was rather thin. For a while she went off chasing rabbits but failed to catch any. Then she tried pouncing on mice and voles in some rough grass. Again and again she pounced but they were too hard to catch. It was hard to see them because the grass was so long and she couldn't hear where they were because of the cars which kept whizzing by on the road. Eventually she got fed up with hunting and decided to do some recycling instead. All she wanted was one nice juicy meal, something dead which needed a good home! Vixy was very happy when she found the dead owl.

Some distance away in the old barn the young owlets were very hungry too, hungry, so hungry. The female owl brought in a little food but the biggest owlets always got it, the smaller ones got none. It started to rain that night and it rained for three days and nights. Barn Owls can't fly in rain so there was no hunting and no hunting means no food. The little owlets died, first one and then two. The biggest owlet would have died too except for one thing - the bodies of the others. The smallest owlets had died but they also saved a life. Big owlet ate them and grew into a fine male Barn Owl. When it was time for Big Owlet to leave the nest the female decided to go too. They left the area and flew far away. Away from the dual-carriageway, away from the fields of bare earth and short grass, off in search of a better place to live.

Today, there are no Barn Owls on the farm. There are no Barn Owls on most farms. When it's your turn to look after the countryside remember to think about wildlife and don't forget to recycle everything you can!

THE END.

