

Barn Owl Literacy

Wings of Change - the story in brief



The Wings of Change is the story of a farm and its wildlife using Barn Owls as a focus. Our story begins during the second world war and depicts a traditional farmland landscape, a mixture of small fields with lots of rough grassland and hedgerows. The farm is a haven for wild flowers and birds of many kinds including three pairs of Barn Owls which find plenty of voles, shrews and mice in the long grass. The farmer keeps a few cows, a few sheep, a pig, some work horses, and grows a variety of crops.

Food shortages, which continued long after the end of the war, meant that farmers were encouraged to increase production. Our farmer borrows money to purchase farm machinery and to pay for some of the old hedgerows to be removed. The landscape begins to change and one pair of Barn Owls are lost when their home - an old hollow tree - is felled and burned to make way for bigger fields. In order to increase meat production and minimise costs the farmer decides to specialise in the production of wheat and lamb. He borrows more money for fencing and the purchase of a large flock of sheep. Most of the remaining rough grassland is lost as grazing becomes much more intensive. Small mammals do not thrive in short grass and their numbers fall dramatically. This reduces food for the owls and therefore reduces their breeding success.

Many years pass with increasing intensification and loss of wildlife. Two pairs of Barn Owls remain but only just manage to survive.

One day a local postman delivers a letter from the bank requesting that the farmer should re-pay his loans. However, although he managed to increase production, his income has not increased. All the farms are producing lots of food and now there are food surpluses, prices are low, farm income has fallen. Faced with bankruptcy the farmer desperately needs extra cash and decides to set up a side line. He converts a redundant barn into a holiday cottage. As a result the farm is saved but the second pair of Barn Owls are lost. Just one pair of owls survive. They hunt over the last remaining meadow of long grass with its beautiful wild flowers and butterflies.

Year by year a new problem begins to arise. More and more holiday traffic congests the narrow country roads as tourism increases. The farmer receives notice that a new road is to be built - straight through the farm! In spite of local opposition a dual-carriageway is constructed through the less productive farmland - the woods and the old meadow. Along the edge of the new road the grass grows taller and taller providing the right habitat for voles, shrews and mice - the Barn Owls' food. Whilst hunting for food for his family of four fluffy owlets, the male Barn Owl discovers this new food supply and the inevitable happens. He is hit by a car and killed, leaving his mate to feed the family alone.

What was once a traditional landscape, rich in wildlife, is now a typical modern scene. Large fields of cultivated crops and short grass with fewer hedges and trees. The Barn Owl is no longer a common bird, BUT, all is not lost. To some extent, wildlife habitats can be recreated. The farmer is asked to leave strips of rough grass around the field margins and a local owl enthusiast erects a nesting box for Barn Owls in a modern barn. Gradually the native grasses will grow taller, the wild flowers bloom and small mammals start to increase. Hopefully, in time, a pair of beautiful white Barn Owls will flourish here again.

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