

BARN OWL PARADISE

Text by Jason Ball, Colin Shawyer and Nigel Lewis

How to make your local landscape a heavenly haven for owls

Paradise for a Barn Owl family is a vast, connected network of rough grass habitat teeming with prey! They love lowlands with lines of wild grass, hedgerows, ditches and riverbanks. Their perfect home is a dark hollow next to the best habitat. They might use an old tree hole, the sheltered corner of a barn, or a Barn Owl nestbox.

Living larder

Suitable habitat supports the prey that Barn Owls eat - rather like a living larder. The Field Vole (*Microtus agrestis*) is the favourite food for Barn Owls on the British mainland, so you need to think about what voles want. Paradise for a Field Vole family is amongst grass where they can construct a network of hidden runways beneath a dense thatch of dead grass stems. Young grass shoots are their favourite food, so there should also be enough light reaching floor level to create new growth.

Put simply, the key habitat is rough grass that has only been mown occasionally and carefully, and generally left wild. Create a vole paradise and the owls should follow! The more voles you have, the more valuable a nearby nestbox will be to owls. Don't waste your time putting up a Barn Owl nestbox without first having some vole paradise. A Barn Owl will also often prey on other small mammals such as shrews, Wood Mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus*), Bank Vole (*Clethrionomys glareolus*), and small young rats.

Typically the Barn Owl patrols for prey within a 1km - 2km radius ($\frac{3}{4}$ - $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles) from their roost, but it can be as far as 3km - 5km in winter. So they need plenty of good rough grass stretched around the surrounding land, ideally all joined up to make up 30 - 50 hectares (75 - 120 acres) of good hunting close to home. Linked habitats help owls and other wildlife to disperse between farms and across the countryside. Disconnected grassland has fewer voles living in isolated communities. Conserve your wild meadows, recently planted tree plantations, and wide rough grass margins along fields, lanes, hedges, woods, ditches, streams, and rivers.

So if you already have lots of rough grass on your site, joined with your neighbouring areas of wild grass and other food-rich habitats, your land might be well suited to supporting a Barn Owl family. If not, please think about how you could make the surrounding area more inviting for owls.

Simple changes

Making vole habitat can be as simple as spending less time cutting or grazing your grass! Usually if you leave the grass to go wild it will soon get thick, matted, and grasses such as "cocksfoot" should form thick tussocks which are important to voles.

Looking out for your voles

Check how abundant your voles are now and again. Take a look at the structure of your grass habitat. It should be tall, with a matted base. Underneath the matting you should be able to find vole runways easily.

Try it! Part the grass and search close to the ground. Eventually you should find vole runways, and you might even find a food store (chewed short lengths of fresh grass) or a nest of woven dried grass. Take care not to disturb an active nest.

Sometimes you might need to mow the grass if structure is poor, or to control problem plants such as nettles, thistles, or docks. Avoid mowing in spring or summer because of nesting birds or hares. Early autumn mowing, perhaps in September (useful to farmers for a silage or haylage crop) allows grass regrowth just in time to maintain and boost vole numbers during winter. This helps local owls to gain weight for spring so they are in good shape for breeding. Occasional mowing about every 3 years, with blades set above 15cm (6 inches high) will let in sunlight but safely miss the voles beneath.

Wetlands and Water Voles

Along ditches, streams and rivers, a vole paradise will help the rare Water Vole (*Arvicola terrestris*) as well as Field Vole and Bank Vole. Leave wide margins of rough grass along wetland edges and keep livestock off the banks. Carry out any necessary clearance or cutting between August and October on alternate banks each year - never clear both banks along a whole stretch, because this destroys the vole population. Take special care if you need to dredge - only clear one bank and try to minimise your impact. Ask the advice of your local Wildlife Trust.

Contact the BOCN

Please contact us if you would like further advice about making a Barn Owl paradise.

Barn Owl Conservation Network

0845 051 0344 www.bocn.org

enquiries@bocn.org



BOCN

Farmland Grants

Grass strips, haymeadow management, hedge management, arable reversion, spray buffer strips, soil protection, and watercourse buffer strips are all measures you can be rewarded for in government agri-environment schemes.

Open ground with rough grass is also allowed as part of a new tree plantation, eligible for Forestry Commission grants. Where you need to control weeds or help voles by mowing, be sure to obtain necessary permissions or derogations from Defra or your scheme's ruling body.

A recipe for new owl grassland

Creating areas of dense, rough grass can be beneficial to farmers as well as owls and other wildlife. This habitat is an effective barrier to weeds along field edges. Sow strips 2 to 6 metres wide with a meadow mix in early autumn, at a rate of about 30 - 35kg/ha, possibly more on heavy soils. Seed mixes must suit local conditions, but a typical mix might be, e.g:

- 20% cocksfoot,
- 20% timothy,
- 20% smooth meadow grass,
- 20% meadow fescue,
- 10% chewing fescue,
- 5% common bent,
- 5% creeping red fescue.

To help other farmers' friends e.g. bumblebees, hoverflies and partridges, substitute up to 10% with wildflowers, e.g. 2% each of dandelion, knapweed, selfheal, sainfoin or clovers.

Mow new areas frequently in the first year to control annual weeds before they seed, and at least 3 times. Ideally, remove the cuttings. Mowing close to the ground awakens wild seeds and promotes variety. However, problem plants such as thistles soon colonise a disturbed soil if you do not manage it by mowing often enough during the early stages. During the second year let the grass mix grow tall, and wait for the voles!

Do you need to prepare the ground?

Leys left ungrazed should develop their own structure if the grasses present are varied. But over-fertile arable soils or ryegrass monocultures are less likely to support a variety of grasses. On these enriched soils it might pay to take away some of the fertility with silage harvests or by growing an arable crop (without fertiliser of course!) and after preparing a seedbed, sow and mow as above. The next year, leave the grasses to take over and to grow thick and tall.



BOCN