



# Barn Owl Link

Newsletter of the Barn Owl Conservation Network

Issue No 8 - 2005

## BEST EVER YEAR FOR BARN OWLS?

Most people on the Network reported a year of outstanding breeding success for Barn Owls in 2005.

Extremely early egg laying got things off to an excellent start, and we heard amazing-but-true stories such as from Major Nigel Lewis, who ringed 4 very early owlets on 9th April. They weighed an average of 400g each, with a larder of 5 wood mice. Archie Simpson in Hampshire reported 95% nestbox occupancy and early owlets fledging in the first week in May.

At BOCN Headquarters, we too witnessed a good year and a very early start; female Barn Owls laying their first eggs as early as 26th and 29th of March. However, the story was quite the opposite in some places, where prey availability and weather were unfavourable.

The Barn Owl is arguably the most admired of our wild birds, shown by the popularity of the Barn Owl Monitoring Programme, sponsored by The Sheepdrove Trust, with over 800 nests registered and 98% of forms returned to the delighted staff at BTO (British Trust for Ornithology). This level of feedback is unique for a bird survey.

### More inside

In this issue of *Barn Owl Link*, we have a summary of BTO's popular scheme, as well as news of another *new* collaborative study that you may be able to participate in.

Alongside these we have local updates and reports from around the country, including new Advisors, and a broad view of 2005 written by somebody with a hugely widespread collection of owl sites, the Network's founder, Colin Shawyer.

Unfortunately we also bear the sad news of well known Barn Owl conservationists who have passed away.



JP Ball

### Keep in touch

The Network is continuously enriched by the sharing of knowledge about Barn Owls and their conservation, from people all over the country. This is all encapsulated at our Network gathering, the *Barn Owl Symposium*, for which there are details inside.

If you have not been able to put your article into print within *Barn Owl Link* this time, please do not feel that it is too late to send something to BOCN Headquarters, where your feedback is always gratefully received. We also put articles onto our website all the year round, so send us your results, photographs and stories at any time.

Text can be kept simple. To quote Major Nigel Lewis summarising his best ever year in Wiltshire; "221 pairs, 671 pulli ringed - that says it all!"

JPB

Welcome to another BOCN newsletter, with articles about conservation projects across the UK. Many articles, factfiles and discussions also appear on our website [www.bocn.org](http://www.bocn.org)

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Top: Major Nigel Lewis chairs delegates in a workshop at our 2004 Symposium.  
Bottom: The Kindersley Centre offers great facilities and delicious organic food.

# BARN OWL SYMPOSIUM 2006

## SHARE EXPERIENCE, IDEAS AND KNOWLEDGE AT THIS OPEN EVENT FOR RAPTOR CONSERVATIONISTS

The next *Barn Owl Symposium* will be held at The Kindersley Centre on Saturday 18th March 2006.

We hereby invite your presentations and participation! We are confirming speakers now and welcome your suggestions on how to make this event as enjoyable and useful as possible. We would like to hold workshops on best practice for nestboxes, but which topics would you most like to feature in the workshops?

Following the outstanding success of the previous symposium in 2004, we will be kindly hosted once again by our Network's

sponsors, The Sheepdrove Trust. If you were one of the 88 delegates who came to the last Symposium you will undoubtedly have fond memories of the inspiring venue which sits upon the Berkshire Downs near the village of Lambourn.

As always, all are welcome to attend, but BOCN Advisors have priority for places. The *Barn Owl Symposium* only takes place every 2 years, so be sure not to miss out on your opportunity to attend.

Contact Jason Ball at BOCN Headquarters to book your places:  
**Tel:** 01488 674727. **E:** enquiries@bcn.org

## Thank you letter

from a satisfied Oxfordshire landowner

"I had a couple of long conversations with Peter Wilkinson who was extremely helpful and chatty, and gave me lots of pointers.

Since then, Vincent and Gary Cartwright have been over and put up the nestbox for me! I was thrilled - they were just **so** kind and helpful. Vince actually lives close by and monitors several other boxes in the area already, so he was able to fill me in on details. (He very professionally showed me all his certificates for ringing Barn Owls, etc, and gave me several brochures to keep, which are full of interesting information.)

He managed to place the box in an excellent location in an ash tree on the edge of our land, overlooking the open parkland, and is very hopeful of residents! Having chatted to Vince about boxes in general, I am now hoping to put up some for Kestrel and Little Owl as well.

Thank you so much for your help and information. I have been amazed by everyone's interest."



Cary Cartwright

## BAKING BARN OWLS

Last season one of the Hawk and Owl Trust South Gloucestershire group's pole boxes almost met with disaster.

We had installed an "A" frame box at a local nursery following the loss of a natural site nearby in a dead tree. After some initial interest from Little Owls, the intended species (*no hard feelings, Athene!* - Ed) took up residence, much to the site owner's joy after all the hard work he has put in to create suitable rough grassland habitat.

The company Specialised Nestboxes were contacted and an infrared camera with sound was duly fitted so we could sit in the comfort (?) of a shed and monitor the owlets' progress.

This proved to be filled with long periods of inactivity followed by much shouting by the young at the approach of the parent bird. It was noted that the owlets would spring to life some 30 or so seconds before we spotted the adult, obviously some sort of communication happening?

As the weeks went by Chris Sperring came to ring the chicks and all seemed well, then one afternoon after a prolonged spell of very hot weather, I received a phone call from Chris, who had been monitoring some pole boxes on the Somerset Levels, to let me know that he had found some Barn Owl young suffering from heat exhaustion.

This rang alarm bells for me as I was at work just down the road from the site and the heat in the warehouse was stifling, so I phoned Ken Lloyd who, along with Steve Brown, another hard working team member, set off post-haste to the site where, to their dismay, on the monitor screen there was no movement in the box.

So the decision was made to go and take a look (Ken has a "Licence to Disturb"). When they opened the box Ken said, "It was like opening the door of an oven." but the young were still alive, just.

The effect of opening the door created a through draft cooling it quite quickly so they put some wire mesh over the inspection hole (removed later) and tied the door open. After some anxious minutes the young started to recover, the parent bird returned, and thankfully the hot spell broke that night.

All the young fledged successfully. Mike has now planted some fast growing Virginia Creeper around the pole so by next season the box will be well covered with shady leaves and we won't have to worry about cooking Barn Owls!

**Simon Gibson**

Chairman, South Gloucestershire Group  
The Hawk and Owl Trust



# TRENDS COUNTRYWIDE 2005

Compared to the many Barn Owl breeding failures of 2 seasons earlier, 2005 was quite the reverse.

Average laying dates in most of England occurred in the first week of April, almost 3 weeks earlier than I have known in 20 years. Adult bodyweights, and hence breeding condition, were already high by late March. Clutch sizes and breeding success was good; and quite exceptional in the southwest region, where in 2004 it had been uncharacteristically poor.

Most young in England were on the wing in mid July. In contrast to most of England, Scotland and parts of the North West did not seem to have such a good year, with low occupancy rates and relatively poor overall breeding success.

## Second brooding

The lack of moulted female wing and tail feathers at three quarters of sites in May, and the early laying date, suggested we could expect second clutches in July from a large proportion of the population.

Surprisingly this did not materialise but the delayed moult in females observed in July and August seemed to indicate that most were expecting to breed again.

## The previous year - 2004

Following one of the worst breeding seasons we had known in 20 years, particularly in the eastern half of England, 2004 showed a very welcome recovery.

Most pairs, some with new partners, were back at their traditional sites and perhaps surprisingly, given the very poor breeding year in 2003 and potential lack of first year birds in the population, numerous newly installed nestboxes were occupied for the first time.

Adult female birds were exhibiting good bodyweights of over 365g in April and as a consequence laying dates were a little earlier than usual, averaging 22nd April with good clutch sizes, averaging between 5 and 7 and one as high as 13.

At most sites 4 to 5 young hatched and everything was progressing well by mid-June. All this was accompanied by the reassuring presence of large and heavy prey items in nestboxes, mainly of Field Vole

and Wood Mouse, and unlike 2003 the unusual items like Skylark and Starling (species taken more typically during years of food stress) were largely absent.

## Bad weather led to starvation

At the third week of June 2004 all changed, with 3 days of continuous gales in eastern England, particularly Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Cambridgeshire and East Anglia. Nest monitoring during the last week of June revealed freshly dead young at over 30% of sites, some decapitated and partly eaten by other family members. Brood sizes typically dropped from 5 to 2 reducing the overall average for the year.

Some regions in eastern England such as East Yorkshire and Suffolk seemed to escape this - with 3 to 5 young fledged successfully by mid July.

In southwest and southeast England however, things did not even begin well. In some ways it mimicked what had been observed in eastern counties in 2003 with traditional sites missing breeding pairs and others with adults present, failing to breed. I was left concluding that the vole cycle in these regions was out of synchrony with the rest of England and southern Scotland where the season had at least began well.

Double broods (partly aided by the pairing up of nestboxes), repeat clutches and consequent late moult, occurred at about 15% of the 700 sites. Whilst this was encouraging it was not at the level seen in 2002 where, in one of our best-studied areas in eastern England, over 60% of pairs produced second broods.

## Vole prediction

I predict that 2006 will be a low vole year in much of England, but not for Scotland and northern England. What fate will 2006 bring for Barn Owls in your project area?

Good luck, and keep up the good work!

**Colin Shawyer**

Tel: 01582 832182. E: [colinshawyer@aol.com](mailto:colinshawyer@aol.com)

## Editor's note:

The top photo shows how Colin uses a box blocker on a pole, which allows him to collect owls individually and it avoids birds being 'flighted'. When the owls are settled in again, the block is quietly removed, and then usually the birds stay in the box. (Only ringers are qualified to 'trap' like this.)



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*Top:* Colin Shawyer and John Whiscombe check the pole-mounted A-frame box at a barn conversion success in Berkshire. Note the low stress method of blocking the box for a ringing inspection.

*Bottom:* Colin shows one of the owlets to architect Stephen Hughes.

## LEAGUE TABLE Average young per pair

INCLUDES FAILED PAIRS

	Av	Pairs	Position
Cheshire west & south	3.4	(n = 42)	1st
Cumbria	1.8	(n = 64)	9th
Essex	3.3	(n = 36)	=3rd
Galloway	1.9	(n = 23)	8th
Norfolk north	2.8	(n = 153)	6th
Northumberland	3.2	(n = 16)	=4th
North Yorks	3.3	(n = 57)	=3rd
Oxfordshire north	2.5	(n = 11)	7th
Oxfordshire west	3.35	(n = 40)	2nd
Wirral	3.2	(n = 31)	=4th
Wiltshire	3.0	(n = 221)	5th

(Some results assume that all ringed pulli fledged.)

This is only a selection of localities..

How was your area? Let us know!



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Above. Geoff and Andy trap a female for leg ringing - under permit of course.

Below. Barn Owls live at this Caithness ruin.



Kenneth Taylor

## CAITHNESS

*Kenneth Taylor writes from the northern tip of Scotland, near Thurso and Wick, where Barn Owl numbers seem to be increasing. He attributes this to the mild climate of recent decades.*

During the last 30 years we have lost Corn Bunting, which was always scarce and local; and Corncrakes, once fairly common, have disappeared. But we have gained Buzzard, now in almost every wood, Collared Dove, Goldfinch, recently Bullfinch, and best of all, the Barn Owl. After hearing many tales about Barn Owls recently from farmers and friends, I began to investigate and found 4 sites in my local area, at old croft buildings, a church and an old mill.

Despite knowing the owls were here, I had still not seen one for myself, so one evening I waited and watched from a distance at one of the buildings. It was after 10 and the light was falling, when suddenly the ghostly shape of an owl appeared, flew along and perched on the roof. I am working with local farmers to help Barn Owls now, just as I have for some years for Tawny Owls.

**Kenneth Taylor**  
BOCN Caithness, Highland

## SOUTHERN SCOTLAND

In early summer 2005 I visited 3 projects in Scotland; 2 established in the southwest and an emerging project in the southeast.

I began with an overnight stay at the Wetland and Wildfowl Trust nature reserve (with National Nature Reserve status) at Caerlaverlock, where Brian Morrell works. He is on the BOCN and monitors a small number of boxes in the local area, as well as on the reserve. A live video camera in the visitor centre shows activity in the owl lofts, one at each end of the building. Despite my patience watching outdoors, I only got to see the resident Barn Owls on screen!

Caerlaverlock's accommodation gives you the privilege of extra-time access to the reserve hides, but there is no need to wander far to watch wildlife, because the 'house' has its own multi-storey viewing tower, a large lake and a badger feeding station. Each night you can watch badgers at close quarters as they roll logs over in search of peanuts.

### Forestry Commission Galloway

The next morning, trainee BOCN Advisor, Maurice Aungier, and I went to the Forestry Commission's Galloway district office to see view their project area, and to learn from their experience. We met with Geoff Shaw, ecologist, and volunteer Andy Dowell.

Their Barn Owl work began in the 1970s when rundown buildings on FC land were listed for demolition. Many were used by Barn Owls and something had to be done to provide replacement homes. Now they have 120 boxes, but the fortunes of Barn Owls fluctuate of course. Consider that in 1995 they had 66 occupations, and in 1996 they lost half of these sites due to snow cover and a bad vole year. Weather is always a major factor, and with 2000mm annual rainfall on local high ground, it is not a perfect place for *Tyto alba*, so vulnerable in the wet.

Geoff and Andy have tried various nestbox ideas, including reused plastic barrels, which last very well. Geoff recalled the evening in a pub, back in the early 1980s, when Iain Taylor drew up the designs for the A-Frame nestbox; now so well known.

Geoff warned us that early signs had not been promising and even regular nestboxes

might be empty; several were. I was surprised to find many locations are far from being the 'textbook' ideal - within dense conifer plantations, hidden away from the nearest tall, rough grass. Originally in clearings, these sites were replanted and are now full of trees again. Despite this, Barn Owls had kept up their occupation.

Inspired and educated, Maurice Aungier and I then went to his new project area, the Scottish Borders, where we developed ideas for Barn Owl conservation there.

JPB

### FC Galloway district Barn Owls 2005

Numbers of Short-Tailed Vole remained low through winter and into spring, making it a difficult time for Barn Owls, despite the almost total absence of snow cover. But 1 in 3 sites used in 2004 had no birds in 2005. Breeding was monitored at 23 occupied sites, but no eggs were laid at 5 others. None of these had pairs confirmed, only males seen at 3, and unknown singles at 2 - another sign showing a shortage of adults.

The breeding season was delayed by about 3 weeks. The first clutch was started on 16 April and all full clutches (except for one late nest) were started over a 25-day period to 11 May - an unusually tight pattern, resulting in another short season.

However, where there was breeding activity, it was generally successful; broods of up to 4 chicks were reared at all sites where a full clutch was laid. Clutch-size (5.33 v 4.27), fledged brood-size (2.92 v 2.69) and young/occupied site (2.00 v 1.75) all improved on last year, suggesting that the vole cycle was building again. This ought to enhance overwinter survival of both adults and young - badly needed to boost a depleted breeding population.

**Geoff Shaw**

### Scottish Borders

Maurice is now our BOCN Advisor in the Scottish Borders and he has made great advances networking, and researching the status of Barn Owls in his region, with the help of county recorders and organisations like FWAG (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group) and SOC (Scottish Ornithologists' Club). As one might expect, owl numbers are best along river valleys, so Maurice will concentrate efforts there to begin with.

JPB



# CALLING ALL BARN OWLERS

Those of you who attended our last Barn Owl Symposium will remember the excellent research presentation by Nick Askew. His study involved following very closely the behaviour of radio-tagged Barn Owls, and investigating how they use different habitat, select prey and so on.

Nick is now coordinating an exciting new Barn Owl study. October 2005 marked the start of a one-year collaborative project between the Barn Owl Trust, Environment Agency, English Nature, Central Science Laboratory and University of York.

One of the main aims of the project is to produce a freely-available habitat map to help Barn Owl groups target their conservation efforts most effectively.

Of course there are numerous hard-working groups and individuals around the UK helping to conserve the Barn Owl, the vast majority of them volunteers and many on the Network. They have achieved excellent conservation results and have also built up steady increases in the number of birds they monitor year-on-year, data which helps to demonstrate project success.

## Informing our efforts

How would a habitat map help Barn Owl conservationists, landowners and farmers to get better and more predictable results? Let us consider, for example... we all agree that rough grassland is important but the question "how much do they need" cannot be answered in a simple, foolproof way.

In some areas Barn Owls are doing well without much rough grass at all, in other areas they are not. Identifying good sites for new boxes and advising on habitat improvements in a diverse landscape isn't always easy, and certainly not an exact science.

This new project aims to help everyone helping the Barn Owl to focus their resources most effectively. Using new computer software, Nick and his project partners will compare site occupancy rates, with local landscape characteristics, to help define "optimal Barn Owl conditions."

This information can then be used to search through the landscape for areas where nestbox or habitat creation schemes

should have the greatest benefits. Local Barn Owl groups could then use this information to target conservation schemes at the zones of their own landscape with most potential.

However, the project now needs the hard-earned information gathered by local enthusiasts to achieve its goals. So, how can you help?

## UK-wide data

Nick is asking for Barn Owl groups to contribute information from the breeding season (May to Sept) for their monitored sites between 2000 and 2005 (not for sites monitored on behalf of another person). Specifically:

1. Site Name and OS grid reference (e.g. Owl Farm, AB123456)
2. Year monitoring started/box erected/site found
3. Number of years (max. 6):
  - a. Site was monitored
  - b. Site was used for breeding
  - c. Site was used for roosting
  - d. Site was not used at all

Nick explains "Along with information relating to known breeding sites, it's important for us to hear about sites which have never been used by Barn Owls - we want to know about your bogey-boxes!"

He is very keen to reassure groups that this knowledge will not be given away, nor used in further studies, saying, "Information will be kept strictly confidential with the files deleted upon project completion ... none of the maps will show where occupied sites are, and all data providers will be acknowledged properly in project reports."

Early data contributors include Colin Shawyer working on behalf on the Environment Agency, and the Barn Owl Trust working throughout Devon and Cornwall. However, the project needs more data from a wider area to achieve its goals, and any that you can contribute would be most gratefully received.

## Please contact Nick if you would like to participate, or for more details:

Department of Biology (Area 2)  
University of York  
York. YO10 5YW

E: [npa105@york.ac.uk](mailto:npa105@york.ac.uk)



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These organisations have all come together for this new Barn Owl project



THE UNIVERSITY of York

## CORNWALL BARN OWL SURVEY

Results from the most thorough Barn Owl survey ever carried out in Cornwall led to a new population estimate of 271-361 pairs and a breeding density of 8.6-11.5 pairs per 10km square, one of the highest breeding densities in Britain.

The Barn Owl Trust coordinated the project in association with Cornwall Birdwatching and Preservation Society. BOT staff undertook the mammoth task of re-checking all nesting and roosting sites reported during the previous 10 years (over 800 sites!) during which they confirmed 217 nests and 244 roosting sites.

A stunning 74% of nests recorded were in nestboxes. This just goes to show the importance of boxes erected by the BOT, voluntary organisations and enthusiastic individuals. A summary report is available at [www.barnowltrust.org.uk](http://www.barnowltrust.org.uk) or alternatively call 01364 653026 for details.

## First DNA case

On 26th July 2005, a 17 year-old youth pleaded guilty to taking 2 Barn Owls from their nest in a clock tower, key evidence being his DNA left at the scene.

On 26th July 2004, staff working at Royden Park, Frankby, found that the clock tower and adjacent coach house had been broken into. At first nothing appeared to have been stolen but the clock tower was known to be a nest site for Barn Owls. In fact, 3 chicks had been ringed there a month earlier. Staff and members of the Wirral Barn Owl Trust found the nest to be empty and it became apparent the chicks had been taken.

A Merseyside Police Crime Scene Investigator recovered a drop of blood, which had been left by one of the offenders. Then 2 days after the offence, a member of the public saw a group of youths with 2 young Barn Owls, who told him they were from Royden Park and that they had removed BTO leg rings from them. He thought they were being mistreated, and took possession of them.

The owlets were successfully returned to the nest and their parents resumed feeding them. A third, older chick, flew out of the nest at the time of the raid and was seen around the nest site afterwards.

In January 2005, the youth - who cannot be named for legal reasons - was arrested on suspicion of taking the Barn Owls. His DNA was matched to the drop of blood found after the raid. He admitted that he had broken into the clock tower, but denied any knowledge of the owls.

Merseyside Police Wildlife Crime Officer Andy McWilliam, DC Steve Harris, Wirral MBC's Wildlife Officer Mal Ingham and Senior Ranger Paul Greenslade all provided witness statements and attended the trial at Wirral Youth Court exactly one year later. However the youth pleaded guilty at the last minute to taking the Barn Owls.

He was sentenced to a 6-month referral order and ordered to pay £300 costs. This is believed to be the first time human DNA left at the scene has led to a prosecution for an offence of this nature. Sadly, the owls did not breed in the tower during 2005.

**Wirral Barn Owl Trust**

## NORFOLK BOOM

During 1990 when I took early retirement, moved to Norfolk and co-founded the group, we ringed just one Barn Owl!

From small beginnings, we gradually made contact with farmers and landowners and began to install nest boxes. These contacts led to yet more and in the process we 'inherited' nest boxes, which had been installed by various people and yet were not being monitored, by 2005 we had over 300 potential sites.

### Early rush

The 2005 breeding season for us this year began with a bit of a panic in the first week in June as we had heard over the grapevine that they were up to 3 weeks earlier than usual and this was in fact the case. We frantically visited sites, and ringed 288 chicks in June, which already beat our previous 'year' best. As you will read later, even this total was smashed.

By the end of June and early July we had visited the majority of the sites and found that 153 of these were occupied by breeding pairs. A further 8 sites had either a single bird or a pair present but they were not breeding.

We were then able to relax to a degree as most chicks of a suitable age had been ringed, and second visits could then be planned to proceed at a more leisurely pace. During the course of the season we only heard of 4 natural sites where the chicks

had either already fledged or could not be accessed.

### Best ever year

This year was the best we have ever known and in total we ringed 430 chicks. Naturally there was still a wide range of productivity.

One of the pairs that we monitor lost their entire brood this year and also the first and second broods last year! So results might have been even better had it not been for the weather - there were some chick losses due to thunderstorms in late June and prolonged periods of rain in the first week of July.

However, we cannot account specifically for the reasons why some pairs did remarkably better than others, but prey availability must be favourite as the critical factor, influenced by location. Although 4 pairs managed to raise 6 young, 14 others had only 1 chick and 2 of these pairs even lost their single owlet.

Because breeding began so early we eagerly anticipated second broods, but only 8 pairs attempted, a further 2 pairs laid 5 and 6 eggs in second clutches but they had already been abandoned when visited in early October. However we have had latecomers, and even in the second week in November we had a single chick in the nest.

**John Middleton**

BOCN Advisor, north Norfolk

## DECLINE IN CUMBRIA

Unfortunately, the Barn Owl situation in Cumbria for 2005 gave me very little to smile about. Clutch sizes were smaller than in 2004 - and that had been down on 2003. I also found dead chicks in many boxes.

Elsewhere in the country, Barn Owl workers reported the most successful year in decades, so what went wrong in Cumbria? It is probably mainly down to the very long and extremely wet winter that we experienced.

Barn Owls are well known for their inability to cope with extended periods of rain because they get soaked and chilled in the wet, and it can also affect prey numbers. Winter 2004 was exceptionally wet from September onwards. This would have

meant that, come the breeding season, the females were not in sufficiently good condition to breed and some delayed a month longer than usual before beginning to lay eggs.

Barn Owls at some of my most regular and successful sites did not even bother to raise a family this year. When the females did lay, they produced fewer chicks than usual.

Cumbrian Barn Owls desperately need a good breeding season to follow the last 2 poor seasons. Hopefully the baby boom in the south will compensate for our lack of breeding and force more chicks from elsewhere to disperse north!

**Jenny Holden**

UK Conservation Officer - World Owl Trust



## ESSEX

With an increase in Barn Owl pairs to 36, up 8 compared to 2004, with 1 pair double brooding, 119 chicks ringed - altogether 2005 was our best year so far!

All nest sites checked this year were nest boxes! The project continues to grow, with well over 130 boxes put up and between 50 and 60 landowners involved. We had 10 sites used for the first time, though 4 sites active in 2004 were not used.

We monitored 14 Kestrel pairs, ringing 52 young, Little Owl nests checked had 6 young from 3 pairs, we also had 2 pairs of Tawny Owl, which reared 5 young.

### Growth and Partnership

During 2005 we have worked closely with Essex Wildlife Trust, The Woodland Trust, Tendring District Council, The Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Countryside Project, English Nature, Essex and Suffolk Water and Anglian Water.

We once again attended the Tendring Hundred Farmers Club Show, promoting our work and also that of BOCN and The Hawk and Owl Trust.

**David Wilkin**

BOCN Advisor, N.E. Essex and S. Suffolk

## WET AND WILD

Working in partnership on the *Sustainable Wetlands Project* run by BBOWT (Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust) achieved real raptor success.

The first young were ringed at the project's nestboxes, with Barn Owls at 2 of the sites and Kestrels at a further 5 boxes. The project works to conserve and enhance wetland habitats on farms. We have also been in contact with FWAG (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group) advisors operating in the area with regard to further farmland nestboxes.

### Monitoring

2005 has proven to be a bumper year with more sites used/located than before and a sixth species located - Hobby. Overall, we had: 74 sites used; 300 eggs laid; 223 eggs hatched; 184 young and 4 adults ringed!

Barn Owls were present at 11 nest sites, producing 65 eggs - 32 hatched - 28 ringed. Interestingly we only had 1 second brood.

Our other 63 raptor sites were:

Tawny Owl	- 9
Little Owl	- 15
Kestrel	- 30
Buzzard	- 8
Hobby	- 1

**Vincent Cartwright**

BOCN Advisor, North Oxfordshire



Cary Cartwright

*Above.* An owlet peers out of a tree cavity

## TRAINING

Bracknell Forest countryside service and their volunteers had a day of training all about Barn Owl conservation and monitoring, led by Jason Ball. Soon after the June training day, volunteer Brian Clews used his new knowledge when rescuing owlets that had fallen from a tree nest!

The voluntary Barn Owl team at Three Valleys Countryside Project (West Berkshire) had a follow-up training session led by Colin Shawyer, aiming to use his expertise to make the best of their ongoing conservation work with over 70 boxes.

Be sure to tell BOCN about your training needs; we would be glad to help organise and support training for your group.

## NORTHUMBERLAND

We saw a marked increase during 2005 in the number of breeding pairs within our Northumberland study areas with a number of nest boxes erected several years ago being occupied for the first time.

While 10 breeding pairs were monitored in 2004, this rose up to 16 making it our most successful season to date with a total of 51 owlets fledging from our artificial sites. (Average 3.2 young per nest.)

According to our records for the study areas, the last "good vole year" was 2002. Assuming a 3 to 4 year vole cycle, we were anticipating that 2005 would prove to be a year of increased vole abundance. This seemed to be borne out with the increase in the number of breeding pairs. We were therefore looking forward to a number of Barn Owls pressing on to raise *second broods* particularly when some had laid eggs before mid-April.

### No second broods

Unfortunately this did not occur. Only 1 pair did so, and even then they failed to complete the clutch, the solitary egg eventually being abandoned.

The year was also notable in that 2 young in a newly occupied nestbox "disappeared" - all that remained were 2 pairs of disembodied legs. The farmer informed us that a solitary mink had been seen around the farm for a number of years and perhaps the mink had found a ready source of food, in the form of these 3-week-old owlets. If so, this is the first example of this kind of predation we have encountered.

### High density

One of our study areas has consistently had a high breeding density of Barn Owls (typically 3 or 4 pairs within 0.75 square km). We have been hopeful of finding similar breeding densities within other

study areas for a number of years. Now another totally separate study area has a steadily growing population density of 4 pairs within 1 square km, previously with only 2 pairs. We look forward to the 2006 results to see whether the high breeding density in this area is maintained.

### Sharing data

Nick Askew of York University was approached by an ecological consultancy - E3 ecology - to assist them with a county Barn Owl survey for Northumberland.

To support Nick's work we have supplied him with the OS grid references for all 58 of our Barn Owl nestboxes and have sent him our breeding results for the years 2000 to 2005 inclusive. Nick's work should be completed in Autumn 2006 and we eagerly await the results of his investigation.

**Nick Atkinson and Alan Levitt**



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Above: Adrian ringed 200 Barn Owl pulli, all just as good looking as this one!

## BACKGROUND NOTES

*As with many of you on the BOCN, Adrian Blackburn's conservation interests reach beyond just Barn Owls, and rightly so! His raptor monitoring started in East Lincolnshire in the early nineties, but not until the late nineties in North Nottinghamshire, when he moved to the area.*

*He monitors just under 300 boxes in East Lincolnshire, of which just over 100 are Barn Owl boxes, with further Tawny Owl and Kestrel boxes. He is increasing the numbers of boxes in North Notts and now has about 60 there in total.*



RUBOP

Above: These siblings seem to be about 2 weeks apart in age

## BACKGROUND NOTES

*The Rushcliffe Barn Owl Project, in southern Nottinghamshire, is another good example of a project going from strength to strength, inspiring cooperation between several people and organisations locally. They are linked into the Barn Owl Conservation Network and often contribute to the forum discussions on [www.bocn.org](http://www.bocn.org)*

*Based at Rushcliffe Country Park, they also have sites several outlying locations locally.*

# NORTH NOTTS AND EAST LINCS

There is no doubt that 2005 was our most successful year so far, with our main species, Barn Owl, Tawny Owl and Kestrel all doing well.

### Barn Owl

We ringed a total of 200 pulli and handled 30 adults of which 18 were retraps, some ringed as adults and some as previous year's nestlings. The pulli total consisted of 61 broods (average 3.3 per brood) and this included 3 broods of 6 chicks and 8 broods of 5 chicks.

Unfortunately a 12-year-old female Barn Owl was found dead in April 2004. This outstanding bird was originally ringed as an 'adult female' on 15th June 1992. The UK longevity record for a wild Barn Owl is 13 years and 4 months.

### Tawny Owl

We ringed a total of 85 pulli and handled 10 adults, of which 3 were retraps from previous years. The pulli total consisted of 35 broods (average 2.4 chicks per brood) and this included 4 broods of 4 chicks, and

the first brood of 5 we have ever had. I also managed to successfully introduce a chick that had been left at a local vet's to a nest containing a lone chick of similar age and size.

### Kestrel

We ringed a total of 100 pulli from 25 broods - an average of 4.0 per brood. This included 2 broods of 6 chicks, and 9 broods of 5 chicks.

### Last but not least...

For good measure we also managed to ring 9 Little Owl chicks, nesting in Barn Owl boxes; a brood of Marsh Harrier (4 chicks); a Peregrine brood (again 4 chicks); 3 broods of Hobby (9 chicks); and a brood of Long-Eared Owls (3 chicks).

We are always short of help with the monitoring, making and maintenance of our boxes, so if any reader would like to offer their services it would be much appreciated.

**Adrian Blackburn**

BOCN Advisor for North Notts

# RUSHCLIFFE

Nest box inspections started in mid-May and it was evident that we were in for a good year, with many boxes holding breeding pairs and several being used for the first time.

June inspections were disappointing, both pairs on Rushcliffe had lost small broods and other boxes failed at Whatton, Gotham and Kinoulton.

We came to suspect (but could not be sure due to lack of ringing evidence) that one of the Rushcliffe pairs were actually a son mating with his mother, which would be a very unusual occurrence. The other Rushcliffe pair went on to success with another brood.

Late season inspections revealed 4 pairs on 2nd broods. Our total for the year is 60 young birds ringed, possibly 5 unringed, and 19 adults 'controlled'. Unfortunately 5 died in the nests after ringing and another was killed on the road shortly after fledging.

Some boxes were used by Kestrels with at least 5 pairs raising broods, 3 of these on

Rushcliffe, of which 2 pairs used the roof space of Barn Owl boxes. We also had a pair of Little Owls with young - and the usual Jackdaws and Stock Doves!

### Track record

Leg rings have always been an important aspect of meaningful monitoring. This year several adult Barn Owls were found unringed but we discovered 4 females that had all been bred in Environment Agency (HOT) boxes in 2004 around Collingham and Bleasby; and 2 sisters bred in boxes less than a mile apart.

We believe that our practice of leaving boxes undisturbed over winter and early spring seems to be paying off. Maintenance is kept to a minimum.

Thanks must go to our workforce of David Brown, Clive James, Gordon Ellis and Nigel Oram who joined us this year and also to Jim Lennon and Kevin Hensley for monitoring some boxes as part of the BTO Barn Owl Monitoring Programme.

**Howard Broughton**



# BARN OWL MONITORING PROGRAMME

*Barn Owl Link and our website have often promoted this project, an opportunity to take part in a national scheme watching trends at Barn Owl breeding sites. Now the BTO has analysed the first 5 years, and here is a summary.*

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During the course of 2004, the fifth successive breeding season for BOMP, a total of 333 breeding sites were monitored by BOMP Network participants, with a further 198 monitored by the Wildlife Conservation Partnership (WCP).

The proportion of sites at which Barn Owls were recorded as present, whether breeding or roosting, has declined steadily over the last five years.

However, the proportion of sites at which breeding Barn Owls were recorded has fluctuated annually, being relatively high in 2000, 2002 and 2004 and relatively low in 2001 and 2003. These results suggest that fewer pairs are attempting to breed in some years than in others, but why?

## **Weather**

One factor that may affect the propensity of Barn Owls to breed is the weather during the preceding winter, with cold, wet conditions both reducing the size of the small mammal population and making it more difficult for owls to hunt.

There may also be more direct effects of inclement weather as birds will have to expend more energy on regulation of body temperature during colder spells.

Analysis of BOMP data with respect to temperature and rainfall over the winter period did indeed indicate that the proportion of boxes in which breeding Barn Owls were recorded decreased, following cold, wet winters, although there was no effect on the proportion of boxes at which owls were recorded as present.

These results suggest that poor winters are not leading to a decline in survival rates, but rather that Barn Owls experiencing these conditions may be in poorer condition at the start of the breeding season and may have to suspend breeding until the following year.

Weather conditions were also found to influence laying dates, with owls initiating

clutches later following cold, wet winters, and there was also some evidence to suggest that clutch sizes were reduced.

Analysis of the BTO's Nest Record Scheme dataset over the period 1980-2002 indicated that cold, wet weather also had a negative impact on brood sizes.

These results all support the hypothesis that such weather negatively influences body condition, leading to a reduction in the amount of energy that parents are able to invest in producing eggs and rearing young.

Recent predictions of climate change in the UK suggest that, while winters are likely to become slightly warmer over the next 75 years, they are also likely to become much wetter. What will the implications be for the UK Barn Owl population? The continued collection of data by BOMP participants is vital if the potential impact of climate change on this species is to be determined.

## **Important findings**

BOMP has successfully established a protocol for data collection that enables trends in population size and in breeding statistics to be calculated and is already providing valuable data for the conservation of the species.

BOMP's value is shown by the inclusion of its results in the annual and widely disseminated document *The State of the UK's Birds 2003* that reported the current status and trends of bird populations in the UK, as well as in the annual report of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel, published in the journal *British Birds*.

While coverage of the UK is generally good, we would be very keen to encourage more Barn Owl enthusiasts to register sites for BOMP, particularly in Scotland and Wales where relatively few data are currently collected. So if you're interested, please contact us:

Tel. 01842 750050

E: [barnowls@bto.org](mailto:barnowls@bto.org)

**Dave Leech,  
Humphrey Crick & Colin Shawyer**



BOC/N

BOMP data is showing patterns relating successes to weather and habitat

## About BOMP

The Barn Owl Monitoring Programme (BOMP), sponsored by The Sheepdrove Trust, was piloted by BTO in 2000 with the aim of improving the monitoring of a species that was under-recorded by other BTO monitoring schemes.

### **BOMP Methods**

At each site, participants are asked to record whether the box is empty or occupied by Barn Owls, and whether the occupants are attempting to breed in the box or are merely roosting there.

The contents of the nest are also recorded on at least two visits, and preferably more, to allow calculation of breeding parameters such as laying dates, clutch and brood sizes and failure rates.

In order to participate in BOMP you must have access to a potential Barn Owl nest site and have a Schedule 1 Licence for the species - for more detail about obtaining a licence contact Jez Blackburn, the Licensing Officer at the BTO.

E: [jez.blackburn@bto.org](mailto:jez.blackburn@bto.org)

### **Acknowledgements from BTO**

We are very grateful to the Barn Owl observers who have visited sites for BOMP and to all the landowners who have allowed them access. We are also extremely grateful to the Sheepdrove Trust for providing funding to permit the development and operation of this urgently needed programme, and to the Wildlife Conservation Partnership for their major part in its fieldwork and planning. The WCP expresses special thanks to Major Nigel Lewis for assisting them and for providing much of the data for the southwest region.

These photos from Pawl Willett and Vale of Pickering BOCN



*Top:* At the Wykeham education event.  
*Middle:* The collapsed old barn at Newtondale Forest  
*Bottom:* The new replacement 'loft' housing an A-frame Barn Owl box.

## VALE OF PICKERING

The Vale of Pickering Barn Owls had a very good season yet again during 2005.

With the installation of yet more boxes into our area, made out of recycled timber by volunteer Terry Vitty, we now have over 400 boxes out there. Not that we can manage to inspect them all, by any stretch of the imagination!

This really must be making a difference to the population these days, as in previous years are ringing records have been steadily increasing, the 2004 season saw 110 Barn Owls ringed but for 2005 it was right off the scale - 170 Barn Owls were ringed - and that is not the proper total, as some fledged before we got back to them. (Whoops!)

Not all of them have chosen to use Terry's plush boxes to nest in, some have opted for an old threshing machine, settling within its wooden drawers, which are very much like a nestbox. In 2004 we had a brood of 7 all managing to fledge this has been our largest brood ever!

### Education

We attended the local agricultural show at Thornton Dale once again with our tent and display, with the aim of meeting local farmers and landowners. To our surprise many tourists visiting the area came to the stand with tales of Barn Owls from all over the country, obviously thriving.

We participated in the *Countryside Live* day hosted by the Dawnay Estates, Wykeham, in conjunction with the Countryside Foundation for Education and the Forestry Commission, where we put on talks and displays to local schoolchildren.

In autumn we also gave evening lectures to various local groups, like the Young Farmers, RSPB and Wildlife Trusts. We have also been involved with the North York Moors National Park in a webcam

project that was set up on one of our Barn Owl nest sites.

### Seamer Carr

Over the years we have worked closely with the Environment Agency; a continuation of this was an introduction to the landfill site at Seamer Carr, managed by Yorwaste.

Now that parts of the landfill site are beginning to be capped off, they have begun a conservation plan and have created a range of habitats: tree plantation, grassland, wetlands and ponds. We have been most fortunate, in that we have been able to advise site management, in support of Barn Owls at the site.

Barn Owls have nested in an old redundant air duct, high up in the roof of the recycling building, for many years. About 8 years ago, a pair of poleboxes was erected out in the capped areas of the site. These have been great success, so now another 2 poleboxes have been erected.

### Newtondale Forest 'loft'

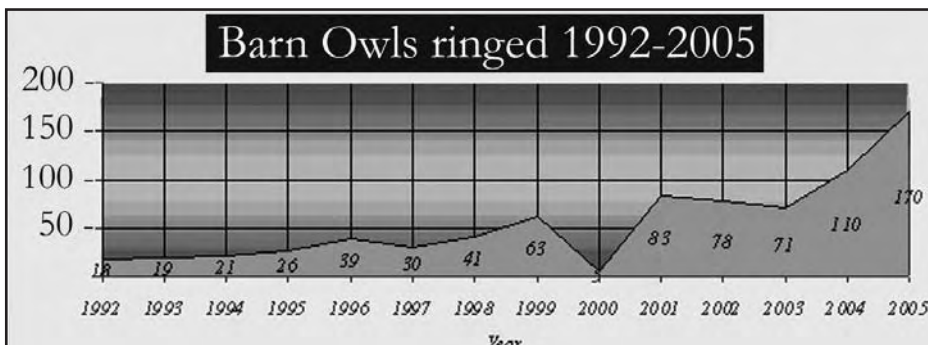
Many years ago in Newtondale Forest, I made up a Barn Owl box from an old tool chest found in the depths of a disused workshop in the forest. I erected this in an old Dutch Barn and waited, and 14 years later, (there's perseverance for you) Barn Owls came to it and spent many years successfully breeding there.

Alas the building has gradually collapsed, so we put our minds together and came up with an alternative sort of Barn Owl loft. This novel 'loft' design does not need a barn; the structure is a weatherproof, freestanding shelter for a Barn Owl box.

The new Barn Owl loft was erected early 2005, after waiting for the snows to clear. We had never built such a structure before, but we have been very pleased with the finished product.

My thanks go to Richard Bentley, Mick Douch, Terry Vitty and Brian Atkinson for their help and assistance. They brought a new dimension to the project with their expertise and craftsmanship.

**Pawl Willett**  
BOCN Vale of Pickering





## PAUL JOHNSON 1958-2005

I first got to learn of Paul's endeavours in the mid 1980's when he was a warden for the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and just before he achieved his BA in Ecology and Computers at Bedford College. He and I were in regular communication at this time because we shared a passion for wildlife.

Badgers and Barn Owls were high on the agenda for Paul in a county where Badger baiting was prolific and in his home village of Askern near Doncaster, Barn Owls were at a low ebb.

I was impressed at his enthusiasm and his ability to get things done, so when the three-year contract for BOCN Coordinator became vacant in 1989, Paul was my first choice to succeed Mark Brazil.

Paul was a good friend and colleague, a fine worker, motor mechanic and an endearing scrounger, an important attribute to a charity. In 1994 he eventually moved on to become Director of Conservation and Education at Pensthorpe Waterfowl Trust which enabled him to remain in Stanhoe, Norfolk which had now become his home.

Photography and filming, aided and supported by his good friends Derick Scott and David Cobham, had now become his passion and after leaving Pensthorpe in 1995 he resumed his freelance status, filming wildlife for the BBC in the UK and abroad.

In 2003 this culminated in the showing of his film on BBC1, 'Five Owls Farm' for which he received high acclaim, particularly for some stunning film sequences involving Long-eared Owls and Barn Owls.

His easy going nature, endearing naivety of anything monetary, coupled with his love and understanding of wildlife and his willingness of sharing his experiences with others through his photography and filming, are only a few of the reasons Paul will be missed.

Our thoughts are, of course, with Barbara his wife, his young daughter, Natalie, father, Ian and with Sharon, Debbie and Stacey, wife and children of his earlier marriage.

**Colin Shawyer**



Colin Shawyer

*Paul Nicholas Johnson*

Paul's conservation work in Norfolk forged many close friendships, **writes David Cobham**, a Trustee of the Hawk and Owl Trust.

The idea of a memorial at the HOT's Sculthorpe Moor reserve in Norfolk was suggested by David Lyles, an admirer of Paul's achievements. From Autumn 2006, the Paul Johnson Hide will allow visitors to study birds on the wader scrape and the reedbed beyond.

*Please send your donations to:*

Peter Cooper, The Barns, Herring Lane, Burnham Market, Norfolk. PE31 8DW.

## GEORGE BRAMALL 1926-2005

George, who has died aged 79, was familiar to many as "the owl man" - and was a passionate champion of the Barn Owl.

George and Dorothy Bramall arrived in Cheshire in October 1991 from their long time home in Guernsey, where they were accustomed to an abundance of *Tyto alba* in chimneys, barns and trees. Cheshire was a different picture, with its tightly worked fields, mainly grazed by dairy cattle.

George immediately began to get involved in conservation and environmental issues, corresponding and working with the Hawk and Owl Trust, British Trust for Ornithology, RSPB, Cheshire Wildlife Trust, CPRE, MAFF, FWAG and many others. And everywhere he made friends. Real friends, for he was a lovely man with a warm and natural touch with people.

Following the Hawk and Owl Trust/BTO survey in 1995 which indicated that there were very few Barn Owls in Cheshire, George & Dot asked a few of us round to

'Sandhollow' and posed the question as to why there were so few Barn Owls compared to Guernsey? We almost felt it was our fault. Dot could be heard asking "What are we going to do about it Bram?"

The Broxton Barn Owl Group came into existence, and the existence of five such groups in Cheshire stems from George and Dot doing something about it.

Talking to people was an important part of it, and there will be many young men and women in the future whose enthusiasm for conservation will have been inspired by one of George's talks to a school or youth group.

While his interest in the iconic Barn Owl was a central factor, he was passionate about the landscape and villages of Cheshire. He brought to this all his architect's professionalism (B.A. (Hons Arch), Churchill Fellow) and his contributions both in committee and in his daily life won the deep respect of all who



*George Morris Bramall*

met him. To the last he was involved and truly alive - enthusiastic and enthusing - delighting his friends with intelligent and informed conversation.

He leaves his wife Dorothy and his daughters Jenny and Wendy and families.

# The Hawk and Owl Trust Registered Charity No: 1058565

This is the first *Barn Owl Link* that I have had the opportunity to contribute to since joining the Hawk and Owl Trust at the end of 2004. Over the months I have become increasingly aware of the important role played by those of you who are Advisors on the Barn Owl Conservation Network.

Of the regular enquiries coming into the main Trust office, the Barn Owl is certainly the most frequent subject, be it advice on habitat, plans for nestboxes or threats of development.

These queries are passed on to Jason Ball, our BOCN coordinator, who may in turn forward them to someone in the Network.

You are providing an excellent public service for Barn Owls, and for the Trust, but I should like to ask if there is anything more we could do to help you. With this issue of the newsletter you'll find a short questionnaire. Please spare a few minutes to fill it in as it will enable



Ms W Richards

us to provide you with the communication, training and support you may want.

**DEADLINE = before Symposium!**  
All fully completed forms will be put into a prize draw for copy of *Birds Britannica* by Mark Cocker and Richard Mabey, kindly donated by the publisher.

I look forward to meeting some of you at the next BOCN Symposium in March when we can discuss any proposals in greater detail.

**Linda Bennett**  
Director

## SPREADING SUPPORT

### Join us

If you are not already a member of the Trust, do please consider joining. The twice a year *Peregrine* will keep you up-to-date with research work being carried out and latest developments.

### Adopt a Box

The Trust's Adopt a Box scheme makes an ideal gift at any time of year. Most of the boxes monitored for the scheme are for Barn Owls, and other species occasionally take up residence too.

If you would like more of either of these leaflets for talks and events please call 0870 990 3889 or email [enquiries@hawkandowl.org](mailto:enquiries@hawkandowl.org)



Dennis Blythe

Barn Owl enquiries to:  
**01488 674727**  
[enquiries@bocn.org](mailto:enquiries@bocn.org)

*And remember to use the new Hawk and Owl Trust '0870' number*

**0870 990 3889**

**ADDRESS:**  
PO Box 100, Taunton, TA4 2WX  
[enquiries@hawkandowl.org](mailto:enquiries@hawkandowl.org)  
[www.hawkandowl.org](http://www.hawkandowl.org)



## PUBLICATIONS

### BOOKLET

#### Boxes, Baskets and Platforms

£5.75 (price includes P&P)

By Colin Shawyer and Sue Dewar.

All about how to make and successfully use artificial nesting sites for raptors. (Revised 2001. 40 Pages)

### LEAFLETS AND ADVICE SHEETS

#### The Barn Owl and Its Habitat

Colour pamphlet. You can also download several leaflets and advice sheets from the BOCN website.

**From the address above.** For single leaflets, please send an S.A.E. and two 2nd Class stamps. We can supply projects with larger numbers and then will only charge postage as required.

PLEASE MAKE DONATIONS FOR LEAFLETS WHENEVER YOU CAN. THANK YOU.

## Barn Owl Conservation Network

Sheepdrove Organic Farm, Lambourn, Berkshire RG17 7UU Tel: 01488 674727 [www.bocn.org](http://www.bocn.org)

The BOCN is a project of The Hawk and Owl Trust, Registered Charity Number 1058565 and is funded by The Sheepdrove Trust, Registered Charity Number 528369.

Barn Owl Link is the newsletter for Advisors on the Barn Owl Conservation Network, and is published by

The Hawk and Owl Trust, PO Box 100, Taunton, TA4 2WX



Our sincere thanks go to all contributors to this newsletter  
Editing and design by Jason Ball, UK Coordinator of the BOCN  
Printed on recycled paper by Telprint. 01793 643291



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