

## BARN OWLS

It may come as a pleasant surprise to learn that within Warwickshire we now have a minimum of 100 pairs of Barn Owls.

Since becoming the County Bird Recorder again in 2010 I have had more time to become involved in conservation schemes and the monitoring side of things, rather than just producing the Annual Report. One of my new projects was to become the County "Barn Owl Champion" where I liaise with landowners and seek to establish new breeding areas, particularly in areas north of Coventry where the species is less well known than in the southern parts of the county. I report my progress to Warwickshire Biological Records Office, where the county Biodiversity Action Plans are set and then monitored.

I will be seeking funding too and although very early days, I have thus far, with the help of the Tame Valley Restoration Project, based near Ladywalk NR, received help and funds from a corporate volunteer scheme operated by Barclays Bank. The West Midland Bird Club has also stepped up with a very generous grant.

The population of Owls in south Warwickshire has been well monitored by the South Warks Barn Owl Survey Group since 2011 and they are assisted by members of the Stour Valley Wildlife Action Group. The volunteers supply me with confidential details for all their nest boxes for the Annual Report. The Group covers areas within the southern half of Warwickshire; the northern line generally includes the 10km squares SP06, SP16, SP26, SP36, SP46 and SP56, however, three sites are now covered in SP17 and SP27. Some boxes have been in place for 40 years but since 2011 time has been found to extend the scheme and there are now 273 boxes and 33 "other" sites being monitored.

The Group's report for the past few years shows how the bird's fortunes change due to weather and prey availability.

In 2012, 30 breeding pairs were found, of which seven had second broods and overall 72 young were ringed from 36 nests.

2013 was the worst year since 1958, due to heavy rain over the 2012/13 winter and a late spring. Only 18 breeding pairs were found, with another 11 that

were paired up but with no breeding effort. There were no second broods and only 32 young were ringed from 17 nests.

Thankfully a strong recovery took place in 2014 and of 67 monitored pairs, at least 23 attempted a second brood resulting in a staggering minimum of 287 young of which 269 were ringed. There is always something new and interesting to be found, such as one nest failing due to Hornets and two pairs which produced 22 young between them. Most significant in 2014 was the period where young were sufficiently large to be ringed, which stretched from May 30<sup>th</sup> - October 27<sup>th</sup>. Thus, birds were actively engaged in breeding activity for well over 150 days. What a fight back!!

Sadly 2015 was another poor year due to an apparent rapid decline in the vole population in autumn 2014. Only about 50% of pairs attempted to breed and those that did were not very productive. The Group found only 28 breeding pairs producing 58 chicks to ringing age, with no second broods. There were, as usual, some other interesting results. 48 boxes were used by Jackdaws but Grey Squirrels, which can fill up boxes with their drays were again noticeably absent, with only one box showing any evidence of occupation. Stock Doves were found using 128 boxes (resulting in the completion of 163 nest record cards) but overall the presence of doves does not render a site unsuitable for Barn Owls. Kestrels used three boxes and a pair of Little Owls again used a box within a barn. A Mandarin Duck was found sitting on a clutch of 14 eggs, only one box contained a hornets' nest this year compared with six in 2014 and one, again, housed bees.

A summary of the 2015 breeding season on the BOCN (Barn Owl Conservation Network) website reports that unlike many other years, a regional difference occurred in the number of pairs which attempted to breed and the numbers of chicks ringed, with numbers generally decreasing from west to east. Only in central Wales was there an increase in numbers on 2014; twice as many pairs (120%) bred successfully and ringing totals exceeded those of the previous year. However, elsewhere, numbers were below 2014. Further east, north and south there was a 65% drop in chicks ringed. In parts of the Midlands (Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire and Warwickshire) and in Norfolk and Cambridgeshire, 50% of the pairs present at nest sites bred successfully, resulting in a 75% drop in chicks ringed, whilst in Lincolnshire and East

Yorkshire only 10-15% of pairs present at nest sites attempted to breed and this resulted in an 80-90% drop in the number of chicks ringed.

We now go into the 2016 season and wait to see what sort of year it is going to be for these fantastic birds. With some help it is our aim that within a few years the Barn Owl will be a familiar sight in all parts of the county.

If anyone would like to support the planned work with a donation I will use the money towards the construction of nest boxes and I will gladly provide details of roughly where it is sited and hopefully an annual account of the occupants and any breeding activity.

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The Owl Project is gathering pace and supporters in the first stages after its launch, earlier in 2016.

The first aim was to obtain some funding and simultaneous with a grant of £1500 from West Midland Bird Club, £500 was received from Barclays Bank PLC with the help of the Tame Valley Wetlands Project.

A team of bank volunteers constructed ten nestboxes on one of the rare sunny days this Spring. They were constructed from flatpacks of panels supplied by John Allton, who many members will know from his days as Head Warden at Ladywalk NR. For the time being John's garage now has floorspace again !!

These boxes are now either in storage or at new sites awaiting installation. A big thank you to the very enthusiastic volunteers, ably assisted by John on the day. I just write about it but I did attend and try to look busy.



Boxes being assembled by the Barclays team of volunteers – Photograph Steve Haynes



The triumphant Barclays team looking suitably pleased – Photograph Steve Haynes

On June 26, with the help of three of the Brandon Marsh Ringing Group, a nest of Barn Owls were ringed at a North Warwickshire site. This site was used for the first time after the farmer had one of John Allton's boxes three years ago. He was keen to put up a few boxes on his land and began to make copies of John's box from a purchase of marine plywood.

During the previous two seasons he was rewarded with a Stock Dove nest and then a, rather more exciting, pair of Kestrels were in a second box.

It was in April or May that the farmer (who we shall call Steve) rang me to say he had a Barn Owl nest with six eggs. The birds had chosen a site within his main barn and were using another box copied from John's original design.

Steve was over the moon and he rigged up a simple CCTV camera so that he could watch the comings and goings of the birds as they entered the barn from his surrounding fields of long grass and overgrown hedgerows. If ever there was a farm made for Barn Owls then Steve has it. In fact it's not a farm at all, it's one big wildlife habitat.

As well as the Owls and Kestrels that are so completely at home, the farm has good numbers of resident and migratory species, with great numbers of Swallows and House Sparrows and in autumn, Whinchat, Wheatear, Redstart

and Spotted Flycatcher are all often present and I have seen more Grass Snakes here than almost anywhere else.



The oldest of the Barn Owl Chicks – Photograph Steve Haynes

Four chicks from the six eggs remained to be ringed. Although Steve was able to watch the adults hunting and entering the box, we were nevertheless relieved that the very wet weather of June had prevented the adults from raising this many chicks. As far as we could tell there were no unhatched eggs present in the box so two other youngsters had possibly succumbed to their older siblings.



One of the youngest Owls



Not so photogenic perhaps?

Photographs Steve Haynes

We will now wait to see how many of the chicks fledge. Hopefully, Steve can watch the youngsters on his CCTV camera as they move around the barn and this will probably tip him over the edge in terms of his enthusiasm for these birds and I know he can't wait to make even more boxes from the marine ply already piled up on one of his trailers.

Steve is keen to help me with my Barn Owl work and we are discussing other suitable sites in adjacent and nearby areas. As a project, this success from one of the earlier boxes bodes well for the future and if people like Steve come, so enthusiastically, on board then we are even more excited for the future, not just for Owls but for wildlife in general.

Apart from Steve, I also need to thank John Allton especially, for his tireless work and support and also Barclays Bank, the Tame Valley Wetlands Project and the West Midland Bird Club.

*Steve Haynes – Update June 29 2016*