



Barn Owl Nest Box Information

Barn owls (*Tyto alba*) have seen a huge resurgence in numbers since the first population studies were carried out. This rise in numbers is largely in part to the erection of thousands of purpose-built nest boxes as part of county wide monitoring schemes. Many counties in the UK will have very active groups dedicated solely to the conservation of this species. The sight of a Barn owl is quintessentially British and something to be enjoyed. They require prey rich habitat such as rough grassland and field margins where they will quarter low to the ground looking and listening for their mammalian prey. The siting of any nest box should bear this in mind; in order to attract and support a healthy population of Barn owls you need the correct habitat. It is also important that nest boxes are kept as far away from busy main roads and railway lines as Barns owls are susceptible to collisions. Another more recent factor to consider is the use of rodenticides; we recommend not using rodenticides anywhere near a breeding pair of Barn owls.

Our Barn owl box comes in two styles, one with a single entrance to the nest chamber and the other with a second lower entrance which is for a roosting male. The box can be sited in a tree or building and once in place requires minimal maintenance. We recommend if you are in an area whereby there is a current Barn owl monitoring scheme you consider adding your nest box into it.

Once you have selected a suitable tree or building work out which way the prevailing weather enters the area and face the entrance tunnel away from this - the box entrance essentially does not want to be facing into the prevailing wind and rain. If placing your Barn owl box in a building you can fix it inside or outside but avoid anywhere that has prolonged periods of direct sunlight. We place our boxes between 12 - 15ft from the ground but remember that is because we regularly monitor them, they are in secluded areas with no disturbance by passing public and we need easy access. If you are not worried about monitoring your box and just plan to give it a clean out once a year then you can place your box higher.

Fixing boxes to a tree has in the past caused a lot of discussion regarding the best method and which method doesn't harm the tree. We have spoken to several arborists about the best methods and always come back to using screws or galvanised coach bolts. The other options tried include straps and plastic coach bolts/screws. Straps seem like the best option to some people but what they forget is trees grow and the straps don't. We have seen straps grow into trees killing the tree and also straps snapped with boxes hanging out of the tree or on the floor (not Raptor Aid boxes) - if you use straps they will need to be adjusted each year or possibly more on a fast growing species of tree. Plastic bolts when used properly are a good alternative as they are more chainsaw friendly should the tree be cut up years later, a metal bolt left in a tree could cause damage and injury to a chainsaw user. We have again however experienced plastic bolts snapping and you still have to drill into the tree as you would for a galvanised coach bolt. With this in mind we use and supply our boxes with a unique fixing plate and four screws which require minimal tools. To avoid damaging a tree you can





look at putting in a pole or fixing to a building. Raptor Aid will continue to research the safest most reliable method for trees, boxes and future humans coming into contact with the tree. If fixing to a residential building planning permission may be required.

We recommend you get three people to erect your Barn owl box, and once you have picked your tree/building get the second person to foot the ladder whilst fixing the attachment plate in place. Remember to take great care when up a ladder and if in doubt get someone who is proficient or trained in using ladders and working at height. Once the attachment plate is in place then you can fix the box in place - the Barn owl box is not heavy but is an awkward size so we recommend using a third person to pull the box up to the fixing plate from the floor. This option means getting a strong rope over a higher point and attaching to the box then getting a third person to pull the box into place whilst the person on the ladder fits it to the fixing plate.

Owls do not build nests so we recommend with all nest boxes for owls and Kestrels that you place a good layer of substrate in the bottom of the box before or after siting it. We recommend using something like compost soil or mole hill soil (we actually use old tomato plant grow bags as it's nice and dry after a season in the greenhouse and recycled). We don't recommend using anything that can go moldy such as damp leaf litter or wood chips as we have seen this stick to food and be ingested by the chicks. The substrate should be about 4/5 inches deep covering the whole base.

Monitoring and Maintenance

We recommend you monitor and maintain your nest box to get the best out of it and to provide data which will help us better understand Barn owls in the UK. Barn owls are protected by law when nesting and so it is illegal to disturb them without a special licence. You can easily monitor a Barn owl nest box without having to disturb the birds with a few simple tips from us. Firstly if you see sticks or leaves sticking out from the box this will not be a Barn owl but a Squirrel or non target bird species like Jackdaw or Stock Dove. Squirrels, Jackdaws and Stock Doves will readily use Barn owl boxes and great care should be taken when clearing them out. Wasp, Bee and Hornets have also been known to use nest boxes so observe the box first before inspecting outside of the breeding season. If the nest box is showing signs of chewing marks around the entrance or any other area this will be squirrel damage and we recommend you move the box to another area. The best method of monitoring your box is to sit and watch the box from a safe distance; the pair will sit on the box and in the entrance if it's in use and can be seen flying in carrying prey when feeding young.

Barn owls have been recorded breeding in every month of the year here in the UK and can have two broods of young in a high vole year. Principally though the Barn owl breeding season starts in May with egg laying and can run through to September if a second brood or late breeding attempt takes place. Barn owls are unmistakable when seen flying and so observing them flying to and from the





nest box with prey during these months is a good sign of breeding activity. Barn owl young can sometimes be heard calling from the box and this is a hissing/ screeching especially when food has been brought into the box. If you have owls within a building the tell-tale signs to look for are large dark/black pellets and white droppings splashed across the floor.

Early Winter (October/November) is a good time to go and check your nest box for damage, clear any debris out and either move it if it has been unsuccessful over a number of years or give it a coat of wood preservative. We recommend a neutral colour that is water based and non-toxic to animals (Cuprinol is a good brand). Make sure the base of the box still has a good layer of substrate and look forward to hopefully another successful breeding season.

Please remember Barn owls are schedule 1 birds and specially protected during the breeding season. A disturbance licence must be held to check nest sites and disturb the birds

