



## Little Owl Nest Box Information

Little owls (*Athene noctua*) are native to mainland Europe and were introduced to the British Isles during the 19th century. They have since established themselves as one of Britain's five breeding owls. Traditionally they nest in hollow cavities on managed grassland, arable land, large parks and gardens and orchards. Nest boxes can play a role in many of these habitats as natural nest sites have become scarce and land management has meant populations have become fragmented. If you have Little owls on your land there is every likelihood they will have access to a natural nest site as breeding pairs tend to be sedentary, but by putting up a Raptor Aid nest box you can assist in the monitoring and productivity of the birds. If this is the case you could consider placing a nest box on adjoining land to support another pair of Little owls. Little owl nest boxes should be sited in prime habitat on a tree or building that allows them easy access to good hunting ground. Depending on which part of the UK you are this could be grazed farmland in Cheshire, an old airfield in Essex, a derelict croft or dry stone wall in the Peak District or an orchard in Gloucestershire; this species is incredibly adaptable but does require a mosaic of habitats. Little owls will feed in grazed areas for invertebrates but also rougher grassland for small mammals and take fledgling birds from hedgerows. If you have livestock on the land avoid siting the box near to water troughs as these can be fatal for young and adult Little owls - place a floating mat or wire in to allow wildlife to climb onto to get out.

If you have a pair of Little owls or have heard a bird calling, look for signs of activity on trees such as moulted feathers which are greyish and downy or droppings on the trunk of the tree which are often an off white chalky substance. Pellets can be hard to find but are usually the size of your thumb nail, a brownie black colour and quite crumbly with a soil texture to them especially if they have been feeding on worms. They will often contain the cases of invertebrates which add a shiny jewel like effect to them. We recommend placing your box on a tree or building where there are signs of Little owl activity with good habitat to increase your chance of occupation. Although Little owls will take to nest boxes we have had boxes in place in an active territory and they didn't use the box until the fifth year so perseverance is needed, the male will however often use the box as a roost site and food store.

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 Little 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. Some orchards we have been to give you no choice in the height as many fruit





trees are pruned low - make sure you use a tree that is not going to be regularly disturbed during harvesting or pruning.

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 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 altogether you can look at putting in a pole or fixing to a building. This is an area Raptor Aid will continue to research into 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 two people to erect your Little 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 Little owl box is not heavy so you may be able to carry it up and hook it to the attachment plate. The alternative option is to get a strong rope over a higher point and attach to the box and get 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 Kestrel 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 Little owls in the UK. You can easily monitor a Little 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 Little owl but a Squirrel. Raptor Aid Little owl boxes are designed so the entrance tunnel will stop non target bird species such as Jackdaws carrying nesting material into the box. Squirrels however will readily use Little 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. 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 as we have seen squirrels completely destroy Little owl nest boxes. As Little owls are active during the day the best method of monitoring is to sit and watch the box; the pair will sit on the box and in the entrance if it's in use.

Little owls remain on territory all year round and will become vocal defending their territory in March/April. The call can vary from a yelping alarm call to a 'gwooooohk' song of the male bird. Little owls are surprisingly tolerant of activity around nest sites from livestock to farm machinery working the land but observing from a distance is often the best way of noticing activity. Young tend to be in the nest from May/June for just over a month and so increased activity and food being brought in should be a good sign of successful breeding. Also Little owl chicks can be heard begging for food which is a hissing type of call. You can of course include your nest box in a monitoring scheme if there is one taking place in your area; the British Trust for Ornithology are very keen to collect data and you can contact Raptor Aid to assist in finding an active group in your area. Another option is to invest in a trail camera and discreetly place it nearby facing the nest box to record any activity. Alternatively some people like to just place a nest box up happy in the knowledge they have provided an extra nest site for wildlife.

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 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.

