



## Tawny Owl Nest Box Information

Traditionally Tawny owls (*Strix aluco*) nest in deciduous woodlands across the UK but being our most common owl and very adaptable, they can be found occupying conifer plantations, urban parks, small copses and rural gardens. Nest boxes can play a role in many of these habitats as natural nest sites can be scarce. Firstly, breeding Tawny owls can be prone to desertion if a box is placed somewhere there may be a lot of activity so pick a tree away from footpaths or any other activity, also adult Tawnies have been known to attack humans when they have young so bear both these things in mind when picking a site. Your box will ideally be placed on a tree of a wider diameter than the box itself to support the box and within an area of woodland or good cover. It doesn't want to be thick cover, remember the owls need to find the box, the male will roost nearby and the young when branching will need somewhere safe to move into. Some people place two boxes in close proximity to allow the male somewhere to roost but this is individual choice. Tawny owl chicks branch well before they can fly so siting the box within good cover near bushes means the young can move and hide. There was a study carried out to show Tawny owls prefer boxes towards the edge of a woodland rather than in the centre, because it is easier to defend a nest site from one or two angles rather than all sides in the middle of a woodland and also Tawnies will hunt open ground as well as within the woodland. We often site our own Tawny owl boxes at the edge of a woodland maybe 10-20 metres in or in big plantations near open rides. This will also help you with access for monitoring boxes. If you regularly have Tawny owls visiting an area this is the best indicator of where they are holding territory.

Once you have selected a suitable tree work out which way the prevailing weather enters the area. Look at the trees themselves; do they have green algae or other indicators on one side to show which part gets the most weather? The box entrance does not want to be facing into the prevailing wind and rain. Pick a tree that doesn't have climbing plants such as ivy and creepers that may grow over the box. We place our boxes 12 - 15ft off 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 galvanised screws or coach bolts. The other ideas tried are 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 4 long screws ready for you to affix to a tree. To avoid damaging a tree at all you can look at putting in a pole or fixing to a building but this is often not possible for Tawny owl boxes. Some sites used for forestry harvesting may however request straps or plastic bolts to be used. Raptor Aid will continue to research into the safest most reliable method for trees, boxes and future humans coming into contact with the tree.

We recommend you get two people to erect your Tawny owl box. Once you have picked your tree get the second person to foot the ladder whilst fixing the fixing plate to the tree. 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 fixing plate is in place then you can fix the box in place - the tawny 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 limb/branch 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 mouldy 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 3/4 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 Tawny owls in the UK. You can easily monitor a Tawny 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 Tawny owl but a Jackdaw or Squirrel. If a non-target bird species such as Stock Dove or Jackdaw has built a nest in the box it is against the law to recklessly and knowingly damage the nest of any bird species and so you must wait until the winter to clear the box out. Tawny owls are powerful birds and in our experience if they want to use a nest box they will evict most species and use it. 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 Tawny owl nest boxes.





Tawny owls are early nesters within the UK and can be territorial from early February, we recommend keeping activity to a minimum around February/March and early April as Tawny owls are prone to deserting sites in the very early stages of nest site selection and laying eggs. That doesn't mean you can't view the box for signs of activity in these periods. The first obvious signs are of a pair of birds calling to each other. The classic "kewick" of a female and the male replying with the "Hoo, Hoo, HooHoo" can be heard throughout February and March. Don't

worry if you don't always hear two birds and if it goes quiet in March, they may have bred and the female gone down on eggs. Viewing the nest box from a safe distance, a tell-tale sign is if there are muddy prints on the edge of the entrance hole where an owl would land is a sign of activity (not fool proof though). You will then need to wait potentially 30 days for incubation and then up to 30-35 days for the chicks to branch and leave the box. When the chicks' branch you can often hear them in the evening begging for food from the adults, their call is a squeakier version of the adult call and on still nights can carry a long distance. As they spread out in the wood you can often count the individual calls and work out how many young have successfully fledged. When Tawny owl chicks first fledge you must be very careful around nest sites as adults Tawny owls have been known to attack humans and it hurts (We have first-hand experience!). 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 active data and you can contact Raptor Aid to assist in finding a contact or active group in your area. Another option is to invest in a trail camera and discreetly place it in a nearby tree facing the nest box to record any activity. Alternatively some people like to just place a nest box up safe in the knowledge they have provided and 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 year 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.

