

# Return of the Barn Owl



Barn owls need an isolated, mature tree or barn to nest in and areas of tussocky grassland, home to their favourite food the field vole

Hugh Clark/Sussex Wildlife Trust



Mark Monk-Terry/Sussex Wildlife Trust

Barn owl boxes come in different forms: A-framed, pole boxes and even the occasional tea chest!



Colin Shawyer

**T**wenty seven barn owl boxes are to be erected along the upper reaches of the Rivers Rother and Ouse. This will be the culmination of a project to create a corridor of nesting sites along the nation's rivers, linking North Yorkshire with Kent. In the 100 boxes already installed in the High Weald, 60 barn owl pairs have been recorded. Jason Lavender outlines the reasons for the scheme.

Sir David Attenborough once said "the barn owl is one of our most familiar birds, instantly recognisable by almost everyone and it has gained a particular place in our affections." He recalled how for centuries farmers built special windows in their barns to allow these owls to enter, roost and breed.

Many of you will have felt your heart miss a beat, as I have, when suddenly a tremendous hissing comes out of the dark, high up on a ledge, warning you to keep your distance. Many of you will have stood captivated in the evening gloom as a barn owl slowly and silently floats along a hedgerow, occasionally dropping down into grass to catch its prey.

It may come as a surprise, therefore, that the barn owl had become one of our rarest breeding birds. Numbers declined by more than half between 1930 and 1980 and population numbers were of concern. The reasons for this decline are complex and it was not until Colin Shawyer, then of the Hawk and Owl Trust, published his hugely influential report "The Barn Owl in the British Isles" in 1987 that we knew clearly what the causes were.

Climate is a fundamental natural factor affecting the barn owls. Periods of prolonged poor weather, such as deep snow cover or heavy and continuous rain, severely reduce hunting efficiency and cause a crash in the owl's main prey species – small mammals. The result is a lack of food when the owl desperately needs it most, which often means starvation or a decline in

reproductive success. Either way population levels are regulated.

The natural impact of climate was exacerbated by agricultural intensification and land use changes that took place throughout the last century. As the barn owl is a specialist predator of small mammals (particularly the short-tail vole and the common shrew), it relies on a large and continuous supply. And as both the vole and the shrew depend on a mosaic of tussocky grassland, hedgerows, ditches, banks and woodland edges, the destruction of these habitats resulted in a major decline in foraging ground for the barn owl.

By the 1980s it was widely recognised that barn owls in Britain faced severe problems. Colin Shawyer developed a conservation plan based on the protection and enhancement of barn owl strongholds from which expansion of the existing population could be expected. The aim was to improve and create suitable habitat, protect and provide nesting sites within farm buildings and trees, and establish a network of habitat corridors nation-wide.

The plan was successfully implemented.

A total of 2750 boxes have been installed nationwide through collaborative ventures with the farming and forestry community.

The first box in the High Weald was installed on the Rother in the mid-90s and there are now boxes along the Rivers Medway, Brede, Cuckmere, much of the Rother and their main tributaries. This year new boxes will be erected along the upper reaches of the River Rother and its tributary, the Dudwell, and along a tributary of the Ouse, the River Uck.

The remarkable success of the project has been strengthened by the enthusiasm of local farmers who have created extensive areas of suitable habitat (through changes in farming practice, often supported by Environmental Stewardship grants) to help ensure the long-term conservation of the barn owl.

Hopefully our children's children will also have the opportunity to stand at the edge of a field and share the same experience Gilbert White did when, in 1773, he watched a barn owl "an hour before sunset sally forth in quest of prey, and hunt all round the hedges of meadows."



Colin Shawyer

## facts

- The High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) designation was confirmed by the Secretary of State for the Environment in October 1983.
- The total area of the High Weald AONB is **146,170** hectares (**1,461** square kilometres).
- This makes the High Weald AONB the largest in South East England and the fourth largest in England and Wales
- The AONB lies at the heart of the South East and extends across parts of four counties (Surrey, East Sussex, West Sussex and Kent), **11** districts or boroughs, and **99** parishes.

## figures

Extracted from the High Weald AONB Management Plan 2004 Updated 2009

### Friends of the High Weald Registration Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

In order to save paper and postage we would prefer to send you information by email.

To give us permission to email you, please tick here and give us your email address (for our use only)

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Reduced-rate admission to a High Weald attraction

As a new member we can offer you a saving on visiting a High Weald attraction. Details will be sent to you once you have registered.

#### Your Commitment to Caring for the High Weald

In return for membership we would ask you to show your commitment to caring for the High Weald by signing up to the charter (see [www.highweald.org](http://www.highweald.org)). In addition to your general commitment, would you also – as your annual subscription – name a particular action you intend to take over the next year, e.g. create a meadow, take part in a volunteering scheme, or not use the car every other Sunday.

#### Please complete, sign and date the following declaration:

*I would like to become a Friend of the High Weald. As a Friend I choose to have regard to the charter 'Caring for the High Weald' in my day-to-day actions, and for the year ending 31st March 2010 I pledge to*

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### Voluntary donation

There is no membership fee, however if you would like to make a donation to support conservation work in the High Weald, please make your cheque payable to the 'High Weald Landscape Trust'. Many thanks.

I enclose a donation of £ \_\_\_\_\_  
(We apologize for being unable to accept credit card donations.)

**Please return this form to** Friends of the High Weald, High Weald AONB Unit, Woodland Enterprise Centre, Hastings Road, Flimwell, East Sussex TN5 7PR.

Please tick if you do not wish to receive any information from third parties