

BARN OWL *Tyto alba*

Barn Owls, their nests and eggs are protected by UK legislation. The greatest threats to Barn Owl populations in Cumbria are loss of suitable nest sites through barn conversions etc, and lack or loss of feeding habitat through agricultural intensification.

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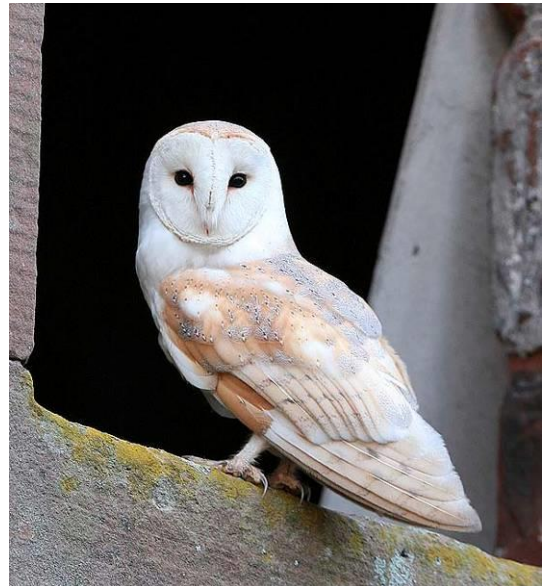
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Barn Owl © David Hickson

Legal & Conservation status

- UK Protected Species
- Cumbria Biodiversity Action Plan species

The Barn Owl is protected under:

- Section 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended).

All birds, their nests and eggs are protected by law under Part 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). Barn Owls are listed on Schedule 1 which gives them special protection.

It is an offence to:

- Intentionally kill, injure, or take (handle) any wild Barn Owl
- Intentionally take, damage or destroy any wild Barn Owl nest whilst in use or being 'built' (Barn Owls do not 'build' a nest but may make a nest scrape)
- Intentionally take or destroy a wild Barn Owl egg
- Have in one's possession or control a wild Barn Owl (dead or alive), or egg
- Intentionally or recklessly disturb any wild Barn Owl whilst 'building' a nest of whilst in, on, or near a nest containing eggs or young.
- Intentionally or recklessly disturb any dependent young of wild Barn Owls.

(This is a brief summary of the main points of the law, not a complete statement.)

Habitat

Barn Owls hunt over areas of rough grassland, roadside verges, woodland-edge and wide arable field margins /conservation headlands, where small mammals are plentiful. Where all

these features occur at an altitude of less than 200 metres there is a reasonable expectancy that Barn Owls should occur.

Cumbria Key Habitats that are particularly important for Barn Owls include:

Wood Pasture & Parkland

Hay Meadows & Pastures

Hedgerows

Arable Field Margins (not a key habitat)

Lowland Dry Acid Grassland

Calcareous Grassland

Ecology

The Barn Owl is largely nocturnal, although it is often active at dusk and can be seen hunting along the edges of fields and along roadside verges. 90% of their diet is made up of voles, mice, rats and shrews.

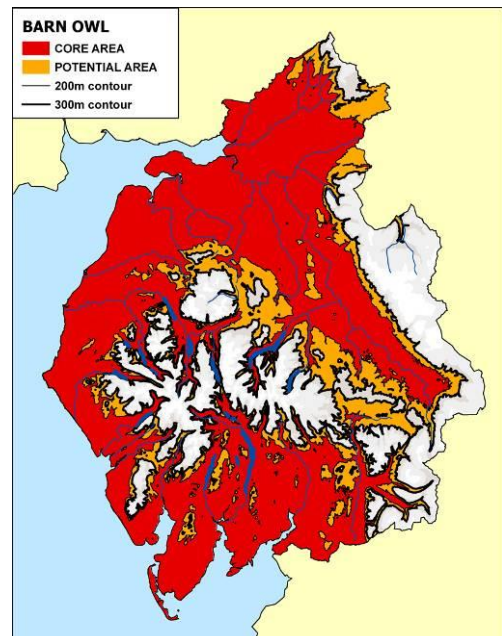
The adults usually remain as a pair throughout winter and, provided there is enough prey for them to reach breeding condition, the main breeding season begins in April and ends as late as October. The eggs are usually laid in April and larger clutches can occur in areas where prey is especially abundant. Occasionally, two clutches are laid.

Distribution

Current strongholds are in north and west Cumbria: the western Border Uplands, the Solway Basin, the lower Eden Valley, the northern portion of the West Cumbria Coastal Plain and the western edge of the Lake District Fells and Dales. Small numbers are found in the south of the county. The species appears to be scarce within the Lake District.

The majority of breeding sites are below 200m but they can breed up to 300m. In the early 1980s the Cumbria population was estimated to be 120 pairs (5000 nationally), a decline of 84% in the county since the 1930s. This has since recovered to 300-350 pairs.

The Barn Owl is listed as a green species on the list of Birds of Conservation Concern⁴.



Conservation Issues

Overall, loss of suitable habitat has probably had the most significant effect upon Barn Owl populations. This includes the impacts of intensive agriculture, decrease in hedgerows, loss of nest and roost sites through barn conversions and the general decay of agricultural buildings, coupled with the loss of mature trees. Toxic pesticides and secondary poisoning due to eating poisoned prey have had a significant impact in the recent past. Increased road construction and traffic lead to increased road deaths.

Planning Considerations

- The re-use of rural buildings has significantly contributed to the population decline of Barn Owls in Cumbria. However, if properly planned and implemented, the redevelopment of such buildings can retain, protect, and enhance resting and breeding opportunities for the species.
- Active Barn Owl nests are afforded protection against disturbance, as are breeding adults and dependent young whilst at or near the nest. Any proposed development affecting barns and outbuildings, and other buildings with undisturbed roof voids with direct access to open countryside, should trigger a survey for Barn Owls
- Any development that would impact upon Barn Owls would require adequate protection and mitigation measures.
- Development during the breeding season should be avoided where there is any evidence of occupation by Barn Owls. In cases where a roosting-only site is affected it is entirely possible that the development may have a detrimental 'knock on' effect if the Barn Owl has a nest nearby.

Enhancement Opportunities

- Incorporation of Barn Owl boxes and other suitable structures within buildings in appropriate locations, especially barn conversions. Barn Owls will also utilise externally mounted boxes.
- Provision of rough grassland and woodland edge habitat for foraging, in particular linking to existing habitat.
- Promotion of the above through appropriate planning conditions.

Further Information

- [Barn owls on site guide for planners and developers](#), 2015, English Nature and The Barn Owl Trust – note: local knowledge needs to be taken into consideration
- [Barn owl box, RSPB](#)
- [Wild birds: surveys and mitigation for development projects Natural England March 2015](#)

Contacts

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- **World Owl Trust**, Millstones, Boodle, LA19 5TJ. Tel: 01229 718080
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- **Natural England**, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Rd, Kendal, Cumbria, LA9 7RL. 0300 060 3900

Current Action in Cumbria

- The North Cumbria Barn Owl Study Group coordinates annual population monitoring through a network of schedule 1 licence holders and promotes the use of nest boxes to encourage breeding.

- The North Cumbria Barn Owl Study Group, through the national ringing scheme of The British Trust for Ornithology, ring/mark individual Barn Owls in the North Cumbria breeding population to study juvenile dispersal, longevity, mortality, breeding success and site fidelity. This study has been ongoing for over 30 years.
- Provision of nest sites and site protection - agri-environment schemes provide grants for the restoration of traditional barns, including provision for Barn Owls.