



Barn Owl Information



© Ian McGuire (Wild Owl)

Identification

- Name: Barn Owl (*Tyto alba alba*)
- Size: Stands 33-39 cm (1ft.)
- Wingspan: 80-95 cm approx (3ft.)
- Plumage: White facial disk & under parts (female may have speckling to breast). Upper parts buff with grey speckling
- Voice: Drawn-out screech
- Life-span: In the wild, 5 - 6 years
- Habits: Hunts & perches openly in rough grassland & can often be seen quartering fields for prey both at dusk & at night.

CONSERVATION ISSUES

voles only live in grassland that is not heavily grazed or regularly cut. This is rare habitat in modern times. Barn Owls are often forced to hunt along road-side verges where they are at high risk from traffic. Sites located within 1km of heavy roads such as motorways or dual carriageways are not suitable for locating nest boxes.

Barn Owls are at the mercy of the weather because their feathers are not water-proof and they cannot hunt in heavy rain. They have also been at risk from pesticides & poisons such as DDT & Warfarin. Thankfully these have now been banned but new rodenticides, Brodifacoum & Difenacoum, are still a problem.

With the loss of many hollow hedgerow trees & the conversion of many barns, they also suffer from a lack of quiet secure nest sites. Luckily the Barn Owl will take readily to man made boxes in buildings, on trees or even in spaces provided in inhabited barn conversions.

The Barn Owl is a specialist hunter of open rough grassland habitat which feeds predominantly on Short-tailed Field Voles, but will sometimes vary with shrews, mice & rats. The problem is that the

HABITAT NEEDED AND MANAGEMENT

The Field Vole and other small mammals, like the shrew, live in rough tussocky grassland with a thick litter layer where voles nest and make their runs. This layer is essential for good vole habitat, created when the spring growth is allowed to grow tall and collapse in autumn. This then dies back when the following spring growth comes through. A typical vole run is shown in the picture below right.



Areas left around field margins, stream banks or ditches and along the edges of woodland, in wide 6m (min 2m) strips/blocks are ideal. These are made even better if edged or even linked by a thick hedge.



The grass should not be regularly cut or heavily grazed, as the layer will not be allowed to form, making it useless for any small mammals to survive.

Likewise it should be prevented from becoming scrubbed over. Valuable Barn Owl habitat is made up from tussock forming species such as cocksfoot and timothy, along with softer grasses such as Yorkshire fog, fescue and bent species, as seen in the left picture.

To maintain this essential litter layer and prevent destruction of entire small mammal populations, these areas should always be managed in rotation, avoiding cutting all in one go. Topping should be done in autumn every 2nd or 3rd year with blades set no lower than 10cm (4in). The grass and litter layer combined should be around 20-30 cm (8-12in) tall to support enough small mammals to sustain Barn Owl breeding.

The creation of these grassland margins can be funded through agri-environment schemes such as ELS and HLS and this habitat also benefits many other species from skylark to grey partridge, hares to butterflies and moths.



NEST BOX DESIGNS AND POSITIONING

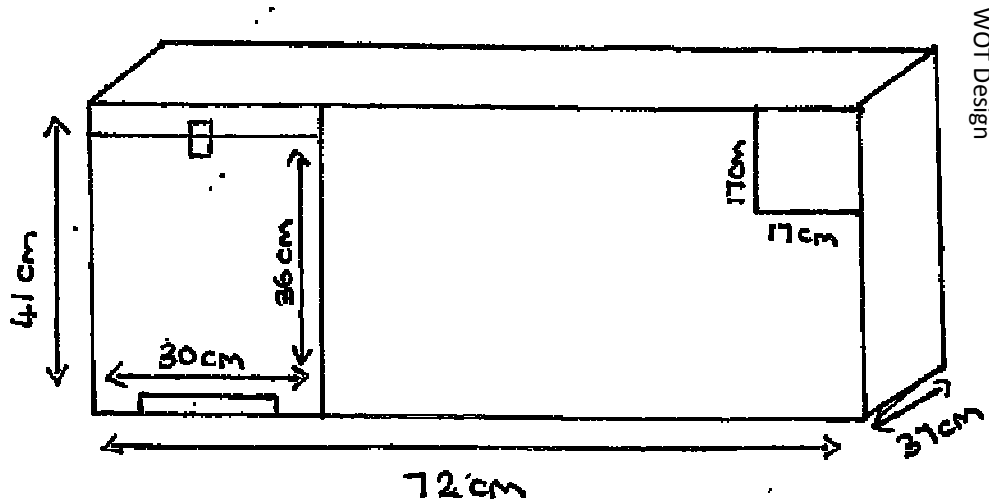
There are two main designs for Barn Owl nest boxes:

- **Internal** (which can be placed in a barn or building)
- **External** (which can be placed on the vertical trunk of a tree or on an exterior wall.)

Ideally, boxes should be placed in pairs to accommodate the male who roosts separately during the breeding season. They should be within the same building at opposite ends or within 500m of each other at a density of about 1 box/pair per km².

Internal Design

Position on the rafters or on one wall of either an old barn or modern building. Barn owls will often use a building with regular disturbance as long as the nest box provides a hiding place and feels secure, however, irregular disturbance can cause them to abandon a site.

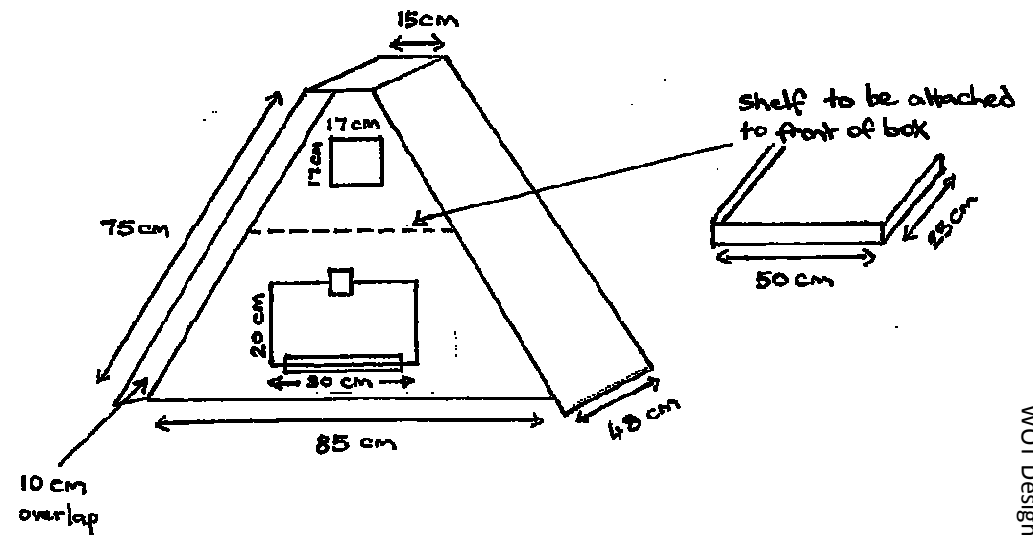


External Design

Position on the trunk of an isolated or hedgerow tree, or on the external wall of a building.

Barn owls are open grassland hunters so never position in woodland, preferably 100m (110yds) from a woodland area.

Where suitable trees are not available, pole boxes may be mounted, however specific design advice should be sought.



Internal Design

Key Notes:

- Use 9mm plywood
- Position 3m (10ft) up
- Ideally in a darkened corner
- Ensure entrance hole is visible to the bird
- Secure to beam with screws or straps or to a wall with x2 coach bolts or similar strong fixings
- Some debris, e.g. bark chippings (not sand) should be placed in the bottom of the box.

External Design

Key Notes:

- Use 9mm exterior plywood
- Weather proof with either roofing felt or environmentally friendly wood preservative
- Position 3m (10ft) up
- Directional position is not essential providing the box is facing out of prevailing winds
- Ensure entrance hole is visible to passing birds
- Secure triangular shell to tree with x2 coach bolts or similar, then screw on front panel
- Some debris e.g. bark chippings (not sand) should be placed in the bottom of the box.

Nest Box Use

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Barn Owls may roost over winter	Pair roost at intended site. Male may feed female & could hear the snoring sounds of female begging for food		Egg laying & incubation, approx 4-5 round white eggs		Chicks develop, average 5 owlets. Male roosts separately		Young often venture out of nest box to stretch. If chicks found on floor, essential to put them back into the box. They will not be fed outside the nest box so disturbance is justified	Young fledge after 3-4 months			Winter is the best time to put a nest box up. Cleaning out of existing nest boxes is also best done during this time, especially if the box has been occupied by another species such as Jackdaws and is full of debris.



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Contact Details

For further information contact the World Owl Trust on

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or visit our website

www.owls.org