

Barn owl



1. Life of a barn owl

1.1. Courtship

In February it was time for a young male barn owl to start a family. He found himself a large hole in an old oak tree and started to build up a store of dead prey.

He attracted a mate to his nest site with his fine owl calls and presented her with a dead vole. They stayed together, playing at fencing with their bills, preening each other, rubbing cheeks together and making various owl noises to each other. You would probably call this sound screeching.

They would also have flying chases, twisting and turning at high speeds in and around the nest site.

He would go out at night hunting for food and often bring tasty bits back for her to eat. When food was scarce he would even hunt in the daytime. He mainly roosted with her in the daytime to ensure that no other males tried to tempt her away.

1.2. Nesting

The nesting site was a deep watertight hollow in an old isolated oak tree on the edge of a village. It wasn't really a nest, just a ledge covered with piles of old pellets containing fur to soften the floor.

In March, the female was ready and she laid four white eggs, one every two days. She would sit on the eggs to keep them warm and protect them from danger.

After 30 days or so the first chick hatched from its egg, followed by the others at two day intervals. A few days before hatching she could hear them calling from within their egg. They had a sparse covering of down feathers and their eyes were tightly closed.

1.3. Growing up



The female kept the chicks warm for several weeks until their down feathers had grown. She fed them by dragging small bits of prey across their bills, and dropping the prey in when they opened their bill.

The male was kept very busy finding food for the family.

As soon as their down feathers had grown their mother left the nest to help with the hunting. They would snuggle up to each other to keep warm.

After about ten weeks they could fly, but they were still reliant on the support from their parents for another four weeks.

They left the nest in mid summer when there were plenty of voles to catch. It was important that they practised their hunting skills before winter came.

They did not travel very far and all were within ten kilometres of their hatching place.

That year the parents didn't start a second clutch as the vole population was low and there was a risk that there would not be enough food to raise more young owls.

Barn owls are highly faithful to each other and the pair would expect to have chicks next year if they survive the winter.

1.4. Survival

Barn owls are not always very popular with other birds. If a group of small song birds see a barn owl they may well mob it to warn it away.

When it is a bad year for voles, nearly half of the barn owls may die through starvation. If there is snow on the ground it will be hard to locate and catch prey.

Barn owls may also die by flying into hazards such as motor cars or trains. A car's headlights could dazzle the owl causing it to fly right into the car.

Most barn owls will die before they are four or five years old.

2. General data

2.1. Identification



Size	Similar to jackdaws
Appearance	<p>Barn owls have a heart shaped face, long wings and long slender legs, toes and talons. Their underparts are snowy white and if you catch sight of one in a car's headlights you may think you are seeing a ghost.</p> <p>Their upperparts are honey coloured with some dark marks.</p> <p>They have long legs and toes, and the ability to spread their talons widely, which are designed to catch prey in long vegetation and hold onto them.</p>
Confusion	Unlikely.

Sound	<p>Barn owls are known for their silent flight as this reduces the chance of being detected and improves the chance of locating prey.</p> <p>Shriek.</p>
When	<p>Not so easy to see. Might be at night time caught in car headlights or during the day feeding young.</p>
Where	<p>Open country especially farmland.</p> <p>Barn owls are not very adventurous birds, and they do not roam very far from their nesting area.</p> <p>Outside the breeding season they will have one or two favourite roosting places, e.g. an old barn or a stone chimney for spending quiet moments to rest.</p>
Movement	<p>They are often found perched on fence posts or in trees, scanning the ground for possible prey. When they spot food they will push off, flap their wings and glide toward the prey. As they get closer they swoop down to grab it.</p> <p>When hunting from the air they do not fly all that fast as they are paying attention to detecting prey.</p>

2.2. Feeding

Favourites	<p>Voles, followed by shrews and mice.</p> <p>They will also eat rats, small birds and insects if they are really hungry.</p>
Habits	<p>They will often swallow their food whole and the bits they cannot digest, e.g. bones and fur will be regurgitated out of their beak in the form of a pellet.</p>
Other	<p>They frequently hunt from perches but also on the wing. Their eyes are not good enough to hunt in the dark so they rely on their excellent sense of hearing. They can locate prey in complete darkness. They have had to learn and distinguish between different sounds.</p>

3. Acknowledgements and further information

The barn owl pictures were produced by The Barn Owl Centre of Gloucestershire. Further information on barn owls, including pictures and movies can be found on their excellent website at www.barnowl.co.uk.

4. Useful words

4.1. Word search

See if you can find the following words in the word search.

Barn owl, screech, ghost, isolated, down, vole, talon

M	L	P	O	K	C	V	N	B	B
E	I	F	G	G	O	O	O	A	H
P	O	S	H	L	W	L	E	R	U
A	T	I	O	O	H	E	W	N	Y
R	A	A	S	L	I	D	A	O	G
D	L	S	T	E	A	O	E	W	V
E	O	A	X	C	R	T	L	L	C
Q	N	W	S	C	R	E	E	C	H
U	O	W	N	I	N	A	O	D	F
D	A	W	E	S	Z	X	D	R	T

4.2. Unscramble the following words

TUR NOC NAL	
LL PE ET	
AR SE SP	
GL E SN UG	
E R T U N H	
H L L O O W	
CA TE LO	
ISH TIN DIS GU	
TE ING DE CT	
ATT ION ENT	

4.3. Understanding and problem solving

Now that you know about barn owls have a go at answering these questions.

How does a mother barn owl get a chick to open its bill?

Why do some people think they have seen a ghost when they catch sight of a barn owl in their car's headlights?

As a female barn owl looking for a mate, how would you feel if you were presented with a dead vole on your first date?

It has been a bad year for voles. What is likely to happen to barn owl chicks if the parents try to produce a second brood?

What is a pellet?

List some of the barn owl's favourite foods.

What are the main advantages of silent flight?

List some of the hazards faced by barn owls.