

Mid-Cheshire Barn Owl Conservation Group

[incorporating North, North East, East and South Cheshire]

Newsletter

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Chairman's Chat

The first Newsletter of 2021, and nothing has changed from 2020, we're still in the grip of the coronavirus, although there is light at the end of the tunnel: vaccinations are going well and the sad consequences of the virus are reducing significantly. Long may it continue.

But we are still unable to have face to face meetings, unable to realistically hold box making days, and our AGM will again be by postal nominations and voting. Many thanks to you all for your patience and tolerance.

As above, nothing has changed from last year.

Thankfully, nothing has changed from last year for our beloved barn owls either. Hopefully less disturbance for the birds and more chance for them settling down for a good breeding season – weather and food sources permitting. The next few months will verify that one way or the other.

As noted in the last Newsletter, 2020 was not a bad year for our barn owls in Cheshire. But that was not the case everywhere. At the beginning of January 2021, I received an email from Colin Shawyer who monitors barn owls throughout the UK. As you will see from his message below, barn owls did not fair too well elsewhere:

"Throughout most counties of England breeding outcome has been exceptionally poor, Although many pairs started in early-mid April with clutch

sizes between 4 and 6, many pairs failed, partly or completely at the egg stage or soon after hatch.

Other non-breeding pairs remained at the nest site until June and July but failed to breed whilst some which failed at their first attempt re-layed in June, July and as late as August. The outcome for those sites which were successful, in England, ranged between 1.7 and 2.2 fledged young per nest.

I do not believe that Covid-19 will have had any significant effect on the results in 2020, since like you most others were able to visit 80-90% of the sites they would normally monitor and ring at.

As you may remember we had the worst breeding season on record in England in 2013 with only 3,300 chicks ringed. 2020 will I believe reach a further all-time low. I estimate just 2,200 - 2,500 chicks ringed.

This said a significant anomaly occurred in Northern England in 2020 with very large brood sizes of up to 9. And this success seemed to have extended, albeit to a decreasing level, southwards but only through the north western counties of England and in north/Mid Wales. In these two regions many more pairs bred successfully than elsewhere in England but this said, eventual fledging success was not dissimilar to the rest of England, recording about 2 young per successful nest.

In summary, the worst season on record for England as a whole. But if my prediction made in 2014 turns out to be correct then 2021 will see things bounce back. The 3.4 cyclical peak of the field vole cycle is due in 2021 and because I have every reason to believe that adult and chick survival levels this winter will be high, and unlike last year, most pairs will breed and produce higher than average numbers of young to fledging. I stand to be corrected of course!!

I have written my usual piece for the BTO website reviewing last year and what we might expect in 2021. The review is along similar lines to that above, not sure when it will be included but hopefully sometime in the next few weeks."

As Colin notes, he has written his usual piece for the BTO, which I've included later in this Newsletter. Although repeating some of his comments above, it includes his predictions for 2021.

At this time of year I would usually be preparing a speech for the AGM but, as last year, that won't be happening. Consequently, I thought I should take the opportunity this year to provide an article (see below) which sets out my thoughts and reflections on the work of our Group – with a few added comments which may be a bit negative, a bit positive and perhaps a bit controversial.

I really hope they will provoke a few responses from you.



I will conclude with my usual appeal – if you are fortunate enough to see any signs of [or hear] barn owls please can you let us know [email cheshirebarnowls@gmail.com or our website www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk or phone 01606-302852 or 07970-235473].

John Mycock
[Chairman]

Our Barn Owl Group – A Time For Reflection, Review and Future Expectation

Firstly, a few negative thoughts.

What links the Coronavirus and Barn Owls? - answer, us humans and our activities.

What caused the virus may or may not have been human based (was it bats, unusual things we eat, errors in laboratories, or whatever). But what has caused the spread of the virus is certainly and significantly human-based. We don't seem to be able to exist without social contact, but even though we know it is such contact that contributes to the spread of the virus, we carry on seemingly regardless of the consequences. Thankfully science has intervened and a vaccine(s) currently seems to be holding the virus at bay.

Equally, what has caused, and continue to cause, the decline of the barn owl, and many other wildlife species, is down to us humans.

The barn owl only really requires three things – a nest site, food and decent weather. Intensive farming methods, barn renovations into housing, increase in urban sprawls, and the likes, have dominated and decimated natural nest sites and habitat for small mammals (barn owls main food). Even the weather is now down to us – with current thinking that an increase in severe/extreme weather is caused by the accelerated melting of the polar ice caps (caused by global warming – caused by human activities).

Enough said – we owe nature generally, and barn owls in particular, our earnest help.

Now for a bit of positivity.

Is there any? Well, yes.

Take the limited time our Group has been operating. We work in an ever-decreasing space, so to speak. Cheshire, like anywhere else, is slowly being reduced in available open space for wildlife but, over our 20+ years of work, we have seen barn owl levels in Cheshire grow and stabilise. I must admit to feeling happy and proud of our Group's contribution, together with the Broxton and Wirral Groups, in these successes and, of course, grateful thanks to the farmers and landowners for their support of our wonderful bird.

We now have around 150-200 breeding pairs of barn owls every year, which equates to around 500-600 birds (allowing for single birds and young) flying around Cheshire on average every day. But, given that Cheshire covers around 580,000 acres, that only equates to around 1 barn owl per 1000 acres (allowing for Cheshire having large urban areas – even so the figures would still indicate around 500 acres per barn owl), clearly there's room for more improvement.

So, what of our Group?

We were set up to support, protect and conserve barn owls in Cheshire. We are doing that but, as you know, I regularly report that 90+% of breeding barn owls in Cheshire are in man-made boxes.

That's not ideal, but that's where we are, that's how human impact has driven things, and we owe it to the barn owls (we are, after all, the cause of their plight) – and so we have to carry on with our conservation support work if we want to continue to see barn owls in Cheshire.

So, what do we do – and must continue to do?

We make, erect (replace as necessary) and monitor barn owl boxes. That is, and must remain, our main priority going forward.

We also advise farmers and landowners on habitat, on the devastating effects of the use of rodenticides, and rely on their help and goodwill to access suitable places to site our boxes (something they have always been willing to do for us).

To be able to monitor the boxes, we need a BTO licence. To get and maintain that licence we have to complete annual forms, record nest box use, etc. All reasonably acceptable given that the barn owl is a Schedule 1 nationally protected bird.

We do talks to various groups (or will do when lockdowns are lifted) and display our boards at local shows to raise awareness of the barn owls and their plight.

To do the work we do we need insurances, tools and equipment but most importantly, we need people to help. We have an excellent website and a presence on facebook and twitter.

Thankfully, we are currently financially stable, thanks to the continued support of you, our members, and local councils and businesses.

We've also become more involved over the last few years in ringing barn owls whenever possible, thereby helping to understand the movements and life cycles of these enigmatic birds.

But, as I've already alluded to above, our main priority must be the making, erecting and monitoring of barn owl boxes because, clearly, without these man-made structures there are insufficient natural nesting sites for these birds to survive.

The last few points above I try to emphasise in my AGM speech. I also conclude with the following – to thank all those who give their time and effort to support the barn owl, your help is precious – and to stress that we should always enjoy what we do, which I think we do.

However, I will conclude with the following plea – through the passage of time we have lost a number of active members and are getting worryingly thinner on the ground. If you are willing to help or know of someone who would be willing to help, I would love to hear from you and to discuss what that help could be.



Colin Shawyer's 2021 Article on the BTO Website

2020 summary

The date when Barn Owls laid their first egg (first egg date) in 2020 varied widely, from early April to July, however, for most pairs, clutches were started earlier than normal, in the second week of April and for others, this extended into early May. Clutch sizes at this time were within the normal range of between four and six, but by mid-May clutch depletion and the deaths of recently hatched young, were largely responsible for the low numbers of Barn Owls that eventually fledged from nests in 2020.

Early egg laying is normally indicative of a successful breeding outcome, but as well as high levels of brood depletion in 2020, many pairs that had attempted to breed were unsuccessful with nests being abandoned part way through incubation or soon after hatching. Other non-breeding pairs remained present at their nest sites into late June, although for many females, wing moult had already commenced and this, together with their relatively low body weights, confirmed that late breeding would not be attempted by these birds in 2020.

For a few pairs that had failed to raise young earlier in the year, repeat clutches of six to nine eggs were not uncommon at this time. Most of the eggs from these late clutches hatched successfully, but all was about to change, and by late-September and October dead three to six-week-old young were being found at many abandoned nests.

In direct contrast to the rest of England, Northumberland, like other northern counties including some areas of southern Scotland, recorded large clutch and brood sizes which culminated in the most productive Barn Owl breeding season on record with six to eight young fledging from some nests. This success appears to have extended, albeit at a decreasing level, southwards in the north-western counties of England and parts of Wales; however, although in these regions many more nests successfully produced young, the number of chicks which eventually fledged (2.0) was not dissimilar to that recorded in other regions of England.

Thoughts for 2021 and comparisons with previous years

Back in 2014, a year when field voles in much of England were at a high peak of abundance, the BTO Ringing Scheme recorded the highest breeding success on record for Barn Owls. With an average frequency of 3.4 years between the peaks and troughs in vole abundance (Shawyer, 1987) it was predicted (but is yet to be demonstrated) that in 2021, seven years later, Barn Owl breeding would once again attain a high level of success (Shawyer, 2014). Conversely, the poorest Barn Owl breeding season on record occurred a year earlier in 2013 and I might, perhaps, have forecast that in 2020 breeding success throughout much of England would result a similar low to that seen recorded seven years earlier. In the event this is likely to be substantiated by the ringing totals yet to be reported by the BTO for 2020.

It could reasonably be concluded that results in 2020 were affected by the nest monitoring restrictions imposed by Covid-19 in the early part of the year; however, between the months of June and September most Barn Owl nest recorders I liaised with confirmed that they had been able to monitor most of the sites they would normally visit.

In summary, England as a whole, is likely to have recorded the poorest Barn Owl breeding season on record in 2020, but if the prediction I made in 2014 (which is based on knowledge of the cyclical frequency in field vole abundance) turns out to be correct, then things could be expected to bounce back in 2021. I believe that adult survival rates will have remained high this winter and in contrast to the poor breeding success experienced in 2020, most Barn Owl pairs will breed successfully and produce higher than average numbers of young to fledging.



Social Media

Please don't forget the following media sites:

The Mid Cheshire website and blog through www.mid.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk

Facebook under Cheshire Barn Owls

Twitter under @CheshireBarnOwls

Please make use of these sites to both keep in touch with what we are doing and to also express your views on all things 'barn owl'.

And Finally

If anyone has any comments or queries on the above matters or anything they would like to contribute to future Newsletters [articles, letters, comments, concerns, questions, etc] please contact John Mycock on 07970-235473 or 01606-302852 or cheshirebarnowls@gmail.com or www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk