

Mid-Cheshire Barn Owl Conservation Group

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

Newsletter

Issue No 63 - March 2022



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Chairman's Chat

I hope you all survived your Christmas and New Year festivities, and the wet and windy weather we have experienced over the recent winter months.

You may think the winter months would be a period of relative quiet regarding our barn owl works, waiting for the New Year to begin and breeding activity to start in earnest.

However, the winter months can, weather permitting, be a very busy period, with nesting boxes needing to be checked, emptied, repaired, renovated and replaced where necessary in readiness of what we hope will be a successful breeding 2022. The wet and windy weather referred to above has not helped us in this respect.

But this is also a time to take stock and review how things have gone over the last few years. In this respect, as reported in the last Newsletter, the last six years have been very good for the barn owls in Cheshire. In fact, between 2016 and 2021 recorded breeding pairs have not fallen below 142 (this being 2020 when the ability to check boxes was very restricted).

The trouble is that, in theory, we should not get a run of six consecutive 'good' years. This period should have been broken by the cyclical breeding cycle of voles and shrews which usually have a significant dip in breeding every fourth or fifth year. So what is happening and what does 2022 hold for us – another good year, or the anticipated collapse?

The next few months will determine where 2022 will go. But is Mother Nature and the consequences of climate change affecting our wildlife, our barn owls, and the voles, shrews and other small mammals on which they rely?

As ever, we can only wait and see what Mother Nature conjures up for us.



As noted in our last Newsletter, we will be holding a box making day on Sunday 20 March 2022 (see details below). We will also be holding our first face-to-face AGM since 2019 on the 11 May 2022 (Covid permitting); details of which will be sent to you all at least 4 weeks beforehand.

Also included below is an article on the dangers for barn owls due to the use of rodenticides.

In the last Newsletter were extracts from the belated Cheshire Barn Owl Report for 2020. We've now caught up and include extracts from the 2021 Report for your information: again, another decent year.

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]

The 'Next' Box Making Day

The Group is organising our next box making morning [10am to noon or thereabouts] at Lower Moss Wood on Sunday 20 March 2022.

Everyone is welcome to come along and help and learn more about our work. Please feel free to bring along any tools you may have, drills, screwdrivers etc.



Barn Owls and Rodenticides

Barn owls have very few, if any, natural predators. But they do suffer and die from many man-made hazards; road traffic accidents, drowning in water troughs, hitting overhead cables, etc. But they also suffer greatly from man-made poisons, particularly rodenticides.

The issue is referred to in a leaflet we prepared a few years ago (a copy of which is included with this Newsletter). Please read through the leaflet to understand how the poison is used to kill rodents, but how it can subsequently get fatally digested by barn owls.

If you would like further copies to pass on to anyone who you believe uses these poisons, please contact the Chairman (as above) and we'll get copies to you.

This is not just a UK problem. The issue was brought to light again by our own Roy Leigh who came across a presentation from www.InternationalOwlCenter.org, regarding similar problems worldwide, as per the following extracts (the online presentation is well worth a visit):



Whoo gets hurt by rat poisons?

with Sofi Hindmarch, British Columbia, Canada

Anticoagulant rodenticides are increasingly showing up in non-target predators across the globe. Many threatened and endangered species are now impacted by rodenticide exposure such as Red Kites (*Milvus milvus*), Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*), Fishers (*Martes pennanti*) and possibly Northern Spotted Owls (*Strix occidentalis caurina*). This presentation will examine the ecological and landscape factors which determine rodenticide exposure in non-target predators, with a focus on owl species.

We will also discuss what we can do to reduce rodenticide exposure in our local wildlife.

Sofi is the project coordinator for the Fraser Valley Conservancy and an independent wildlife biologist currently working on various research projects for the government, municipalities and NGO's. Her primary research focuses on understanding how habitat loss and rodenticide exposure are affecting our resident owl species such as barn owls and western screech-owls. She also works with farmers encouraging the use of barn owls and other raptors as biological rodent control. Her last two research projects, amongst many, is working with farmers to test a self-resetting non-poisonous trap to be used to control rodents in agricultural landscapes and using audio recording units to detect the threatened western screech-owl and their interactions with other owls.

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

Cheshire Barn Owl Report 2021



Introduction

This report collates data from the Wirral Barn Owl Trust, Wirral South and the Mid, South, West, North, East and North East Cheshire Barn Owl groups.

Summary

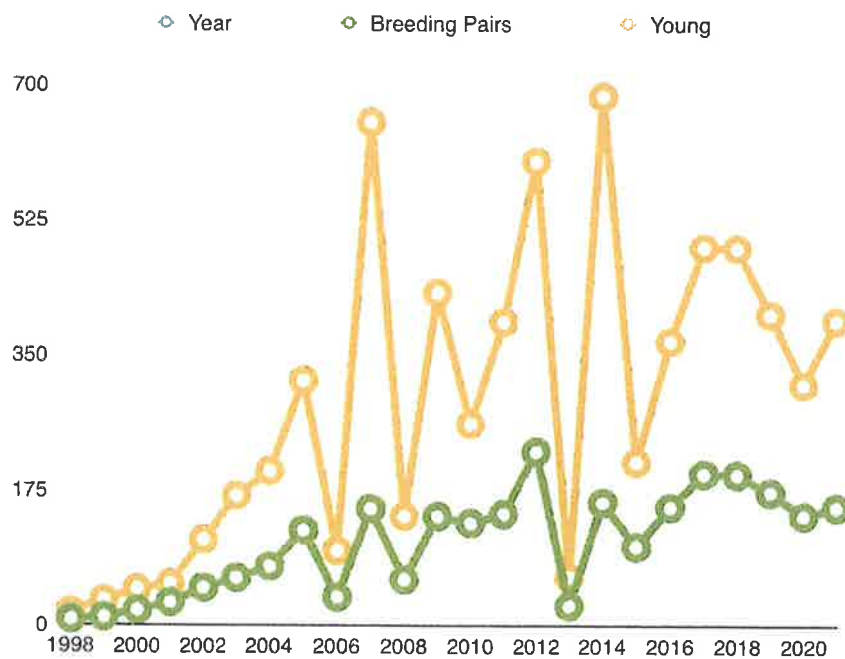
An average year

Total successful pairs	153
Total counted young	394
Young per breeding pair	2.6
Boxes checked	950

Note that in the vast majority of breeding sites the young were ringed OR were close to fledging.

Group totals

Group	Pairs	Young	Boxes(check ed)	% boxes checked
West	27	82	258	50
Mid	38	90	245	50
North	3	6	10	20
South	42	118	270	90
East	20	48	91	50
N/E	8	18	38	30
Wirral	6	16	?	?
Wirral s	9	26	34	61
<u>Total</u>	<u>153</u>	<u>394</u>	<u>946</u>	



Year	Breeding Pairs	Young	Young per pair
1998	7	17	2.4
1999	10	32	2.3
2000	19	46	2.2
2001	29	53	2.4
2002	48	110	2.3
2003	61	167	3.1
2004	76	199	2.8
2005	123	316	3.1
2006	36	96	2.7
2007	151	651	4.3
2008	59	141	2.3
2009	141	430	3.0
2010	132	260	1.96
2011	144	392	2.72
2012	225	600	2.66
2013	25	62	2.48
2014	159	685	4.3
2015	102	211	2.1
2016	153	367	2.4
2017	196	489	2.5
2018	195	488	2.5
2019	172	402	2.3
2020	157	343	2.1
2021	153	394	2.6

	Total boxes	Boxes used successfully	% Utilisation
Mid	489	38	7.8
East	182	20	11.0
North	54	3	5.5
North East	124	8	6.4

South	310	42	13.5
West	500	27	5.4
WBOT	150	6	4.0
Wirral s	55	9	16.3

Type of breeding site

Group	Tree box	Barn box	Pole box	Building	Natural Tree site	Total
Mid	38	0	0	0	0	38
North	2	0	0	1	0	3
East	18	0	0	2	0	20
N/E	7	0	0	1	0	8
South	34	0	4	3	1	42
WBOT	2	1	3	0	0	6
Wirral s	6	0	3	0	0	9
West	2	0	25	0	0	27
Total	109	1	35	8	0	153

Discussion

Some improvement in numbers over last year. The numbers are probably better than shown in this report after allowing for covid restrictions on surveying. Most groups are now only checking around half their boxes and there are likely to be owls breeding in some of the unchecked boxes..

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of A McCreary and B Wright of the West Cheshire Group, Steve Binney of the MRG, J Mycock of the Mid Cheshire group and Steve Harris of the Wirral Barn Owl Trust who have provided the data for this report.

Cheshire Farmland Raptor Project

Our Birds of Prey are being Poisoned

Mid Cheshire Barn
Owl Conservation Group



www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk



HIGHLY TOXIC rat poisons called Second Generation Anticoagulant Rodenticides (SGARs) were first introduced in the 1970's. Since then the proportion of Barn Owls found to contain this type of poison has increased from 5% in 1984 (Newton et. al. 1990) to 91%* in 2010 (Walker et. al. 2012), and in 2011 the proportion of Kestrels contaminated reached 100% (Walker et. al. 2013). Some birds die as a direct result – typically bleeding to death from internal haemorrhage (Taylor 1994). The effects of sub-lethal doses are unknown although the anticoagulant Warfarin in humans can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and fever (Taro Pharmaceuticals (UK) Ltd. 2008) – and Warfarin is 100 to 1,000 times less acutely toxic than SGARs. It is probable that SGAR poisoning is a significant cause of Barn Owl decline and there is no doubt that the overall effect on predatory birds is negative.

Owls and other raptors can be killed by the use of this product even if the instructions are strictly followed. **This type of rodenticide has been detected in up to 91% of Barn Owls and 100% of Kestrels analysed by the Predatory Bird Monitoring Scheme.**

This product is slow acting. Typically, it takes 3–14 days for poisoned rodents to die, before which they will still be moving around and may be eaten by predators such as Barn Owls, causing 'secondary poisoning'.

Given that the rodents are more easily caught and eaten by predators, and given that the rodents are poisoned, they are less fit than other animals and become easier for predators to catch.

These rodents are consumed by the birds and overtime the poison builds up in the birds, it may also be passed on to young birds if they are fed them by the parent birds.

Bait covering reduces the chance of large non-target animals eating the poison, but does not significantly reduce secondary poisoning of predators that eat small mammals (Barn Owls, Kestrels, Red Kites, Stoats, Weasels, Polecats etc.).

This product should only be used as a last resort where other control methods, non-toxic products and less-toxic products have been recently used and a rodent problem persists. It must not be used permanently or as a preventative measure but only for a maximum of 35 days where there is a significant threat to public health.

What can you do?

Think – Do you really need to use poison?

Use of SGARs as a Last Resort use only – **second generation anticoagulant rodenticides** (SGARs) must only be used after non-toxic and less toxic control methods have been fully deployed and if a persistent rodent problem is still a significant threat to public health.

If you need to use poisons, please use first generation poisons that kill within hours of ingestion. Whilst a risk is still there, the potential for poisoned prey animals running around is minimal. Other rodent control is available, including trapping, cat, dogs, electro trapping etc.

Why not try natural rodent control – install an owl nestbox, this is an effective method of rodent control, that won't cost you anything!!