Mid-Cheshire Barn Owl Conservation Group

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

Newsletter

Issue No 59 - December 2020

Chairman's Chat

Firstly, on behalf of the Committee, may I wish all our members a very happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

Let's hope 2021 is better, happier, and a more 'normal' year than 2020. I can only describe 2020 as extraordinary, horrific and, hopefully, a once-in-a-lifetime experience which we never have to go through again.

From a barn owl perspective, 2020 was not a bad year, nor was it a massively brilliant year. The birds survived yet another unpredictable year of extreme weather conditions; something 'experts' are advising will become more common in the future. They undoubtedly benefited from less disturbance by us humans; with our activities being severely limited by the imposed Covid 19 lockdown restrictions.

The results from the boxes we were able to check were as follows:

Breeding sites	117 number (of which 7 subsequently failed)
Chicks	234 number

Although the number of chicks is slightly down on last year (266 chicks), the above number of successful breeding sites (when Covid 19 access restrictions are taken into account) are very similar to last year's numbers (115 successful breeding sites). The full figures for Cheshire are also expected to be close to last year's numbers (172 successful breeding sites, with 402 chicks) but with the number of chicks likely to be slightly down.

To enable us to check the barn owl boxes we have erected we have to hold a Schedule 1 permit/licence. We also submit the results of our box checks to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) as part of its Nest Record Scheme.

I have included in this Newsletter extracts from the BTO website detailing what is involved in its Nest Record Scheme which I hope you find interesting (although the extract is slightly out of date as more and more records are now being submitted by computer).

As you will see, the barn owl records form only a small part of the overall BTO scheme.

In addition, the Government published its *'Path to Sustainable Farming'* on the 30 November 2020, setting out details of the changes they propose to make to our national farming systems. One of the key changes included the following:

> *Introducing the Environmental Land Management scheme to incentivise sustainable farming practices,* ***create habitats for nature recovery*** *and establish new woodland to help tackle climate change.*
> (emphasis added)

We must endorse and support the above habitat endeavour as this will have a significant beneficial effect for our barn owls.

I have included in this Newsletter an article (previously published in one of our Newsletter many years ago) which outlines the importance of habitat on the conservation of our beloved bird.

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 01606-75937 or 07970-235473].

John Mycock
[Chairman]

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Nest Record Scheme

The BTO's Nest Record Scheme is the largest, longest running and most highly computerised of such schemes in the world and employs the most advanced and efficient techniques of data gathering, data capture and analysis. BTO now holds more than 1.8 million nest records, of which approximately 60% are already computerised.

The primary aim of the Nest Record Scheme is to monitor the breeding performance of a wide range of UK birds annually as a key part of the BTO's data collection. Another primary aim is to undertake detailed analyses of breeding performance of species of conservation interest.

The Nest Record Scheme gathers data on the breeding performance of birds in the UK through a network of volunteer ornithologists. Each observer is given a code of conduct that emphasises the responsibility of recorders towards the safety of the birds they record and explains their legal responsibilities. These observers complete standard nest record cards for each nest they find, or submit computerised data, giving details of nest site, habitat, contents of the nest at each visit and evidence for success or failure. Data are prioritised for computer input according to their potential for population monitoring and for specific research projects. Those for Schedule 1 species are kept confidential. (These are species protected from disturbance at the nest by Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981: they are generally rare species and the location of their nests may need to be protected from egg collecting (an illegal activity for every wild bird) or other potential disturbance. A special licence is required to visit any nest of a Schedule 1 species). Computer programs developed by BTO check the data for errors and calculate first-egg date, clutch size and rates of nest loss at the egg and chick stages.

Currently the BTO collects c.40,000 nest records per year for about 180 species. Typically, more than 150 records are received each year for 50 species and over 100 for a further 15–25 species. Volunteers may submit data on card, via the MS Windows software 'IPMR' or via the online portal 'Demography Online' (but are moving rapidly towards the latter). The general distribution of completed nest records is patchy at the county scale but is more even over larger regions of the UK. Overall, Northern Ireland and parts of Scotland (southeast, Western Isles) and parts of England (West Midlands, southwest) have relatively low coverage, often reflecting observer density. A major analysis of trends over time in various aspects of breeding performance found relatively few differences between major regions, when analysed using analysis of covariance. The scheme receives records from all the UK's major habitats. Most records come from woodland, farmland and freshwater sites, but the scheme also receives data from scrub, grassland, heathland and coastal areas.

Each nest record details a single breeding attempt using simple, standardised techniques. Any nest can be recorded anywhere in the UK. Each nest record should contain the following information:

- Location – Observers should record the county, place and grid reference for the nest. The geographical location of a nest can affect breeding success due to differences in habitat and weather conditions.
- Nest Contents – After identifying the species that has built the nest (often the easiest way is to watch for the adults), it should be visited on several occasions (for example every four days). The stage of development of the nest, eggs and young should be recorded using the simple 'Status Codes' provided. A series of visits to a nest throughout the nesting period is more valuable than single visits to a number of nests, as multiple visits allow us to calculate egg and nestling survival rates.
- Date – Recording the year in which the record was collected allows calculation of annual changes in productivity. The date of each visit is also important - the timing of breeding may affect its success.
- Habitat – The type of habitat surrounding the nest may influence a variety of factors such as food availability, competition for nesting sites and predator abundance. These could all have an effect on breeding success. Collecting habitat data therefore allows us to investigate these relationships.
- Nest Site – Is the nest well hidden or exposed? Is it on flat ground or in a bush? Again, nest site details such as these may influence breeding success. For example, nests high up in a bushes or trees may tend to be more successful than those at low level.

Which species do nest recorders monitor?

The Nest Record Scheme welcomes records for ALL nests of wild birds, not just the rare ones, as long as it is possible to see into the nest to record the contents. BTO

does have a number of target species that would benefit from the collection of more data to improve the accuracy of our estimates of breeding success.

BTO are particularly keen to receive more records of open nesting passerines, such as pipits, larks, chats, warblers, finches and buntings. Numbers of records for this group have declined rapidly since the 1970s, even for widespread species such as Dunnock and Greenfinch, so if you do find any BTO would be very grateful for your records.

A Schedule 1 Permit/Licence is needed to monitor some species

Although nests of all wild birds can be monitored for the Scheme, some species are specially protected, including Barn Owl, Kingfisher and Little Tern. If you want to monitor a specially protected species for NRS, you must first obtain a licence/permit.

2020 AGM – By Proxy

Many thanks to everyone who responded to the requests regarding the 2020 AGM (by proxy); all very gratefully received.

The results were that all the proposals were fully approved, providing the following committee members:

John Mycock [Chairman and Treasurer]
David Kerr [Membership Sec]
Peter Galley
Roy Leigh
Ian Jones
Tony Dickinson
David Bromont
Nigel Wilde
Darren Mayer
Matt Lawton
Hayley Care
Heather Smith
Joanne Evans

In addition, the Constitution has now been amended to cover both future AGMs and Committee meetings should similar Covid 19 restrictions be effective in the future.

We can only hope that the recent good news regarding Covid 19 vaccines proves to be as successful as everyone hopes, and that 2021 sees an end (or at least a control) of this terrible disease. Until then, next year's face-to-face AGM, meetings and box making days must remain on hold.

Habitat

Habitat Needs

Barn owls will only attempt to breed if there is sufficient food around, and this needs the habitat to be right. They need extensive areas of rough grassland or lightly grazed grassland either as whole fields or field margins which form 'corridors'.

Barn owls most usual prey are short-tailed voles, mice and shrews which inhabit such areas of grassland.

The barn owl can survive quite well on modern intensively farmed land where 'corridors' exist, provided they are extensive enough. A 240 acre farm with about 10 fields edged with corridors can provide the necessary hunting range for breeding to occur. On smaller farms, farmers working together or in co-operation with organisations such as ours can group together to provide this type of habitat.

Temporary ley grassland, cultivated land and fields well grazed by sheep or cattle do not provide the necessary type of habitat.

Habitat Lost

The expansion of industry and housing into the countryside has taken away hunting grounds, nesting sites and corridors. Even though open countryside may be nearby the rough grassland barn owls need is also disappearing.

The introduction of more efficient and intensive land use, larger fields worked right up to their boundaries and the cutting or removal of hedgerows has resulted in large scale loss of rough grassland. This has been very advantageous to land users but unfortunately this loss of rough grassland has been to the disadvantage of the barn owl.

Even on land where good habitat remains barn owls can disappear because they are isolated from other barn owls by large unbroken expanses of lost habitat. This isolation make is difficult for young birds to disperse and maintain a stable population.

Although there are other factors which have caused the decline of the barn owl, loss of habitat is considered the most significant and is a major impediment to the conservation of the species.

Habitat Maintenance

Barn owls are birds of low-lying open farmland and the woodland edge. They will only attempt to breed if sufficient areas of rough ungrazed or lightly grazed tussocky grassland are present in the form of whole fields or field margins. The barn owl will normally feed within 1-2 kms. [0.6-1.2 miles] of the nest site requiring a minimum of some 50 ha [120 acres] of rough grassland.

In regions where the grassy banks of rivers, canals, ditches, hedgerows, farm tracks and woodland edge provide the only suitable habitat, the barn owl will range up to 4 kms [2.5 miles] or more. Grassland margins 6 metres [20 ft] or more wide can be created easily by reducing the amount of cutting and spraying of non-selective herbicides beneath hedgerows, and by allowing rough grassland edges to regenerate along existing natural features of the farm, such as rivers, canals, ditches, hedgerows, farm tracks and woodland edge. The tussocky grass which eventually develops will require cutting, or grazing, once every two or three years in the late autumn, to prevent the development of hard scrub.

Thick hedges and woodland plots provide cover for small mammals and other wildlife. The rough grassland which develops on the banks of drainage ditches is an important foraging habitat for the barn owl. When ditches need to be cleared, dredging and bank scraping should be limited to just one side of the ditch one year and the other side the next year. This form of rotational management allows these important habitats to remain intact.

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 01606-75937 or cheshirebarnowls@gmail.com or www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk