

Barn owl
Tyto alba

The barn owl in flight is a brilliant display of warm yellows and delicate greys sprinkled with silver bits which ends in dark buff. A sleeping barn owl's closed eyes give the illusion of a smile.

The rest of this article would contain no more unscientific, amateurish information such as above but will be full of interesting facts clearly laid out, statistics and all, it will also contain information on how you can help conserve the animal, hell, it will even be referenced.

The barn owl is of medium size, with body length between 34 cm (13 inch) and 37 cm (15 inch), wingspan is 85cm (33 inch) to 90cm (35 inch), weight 250-300 g. (Nyagolov, 2003, 47) The barn owl is long-legged, without 'ear' tufts, and their heart shaped facial disc serves to reflect sound to its ears. (Lawrence, 1997, 109) They are capable of changing the shape of their disc in order to assume unique facial expressions. (Nyagolov, 2003, 47) Male and female barn owls do not appear distinct except the female is slightly larger and somewhat darker in colour. (Lawrence, 1997, 110)

The barn owl lives in the wild for 4 to 6 years on average, in captivity it may live to 15 to 20 years. Courtship between the male and the female begins in February and includes mostly mutual preening and conversational chirruping and squeaking. (Bunn, 1982, 106) Some pairs remain at the nest site throughout the year while others pay periodic visits to each other and meet for nightly excursions. (Bunn, 1982, 106)

The young barn owl moves away progressively from the nest area and tends to settle in regions up to 97 kilometres (60 miles) from the nest. Barn owl eggs are laid at two to three day intervals, the clutch size is extremely variable, every number from two to eleven have been recorded. (Bunn, 1982, 118) Barn owl chicks are rather appalling to look at, with their rough, undefined features obscured by a layer of uneven white fluff. In the most professional scholarly study of the barn owl made by Bunn, Warburton and Wilson, the owlets are quite seriously described as 'ugly'.

As its name suggests, barn owls usually nest in barns, hollow trees, old houses, and outbuildings. The barn owl is believed to be a cliff-haunting bird, breeding and roosting in the natural crevices and caves that are simulated to all intents and purposes by the man made structures that the barn owl now occupy. (Bunn, 1982, 195)

Barn owls select their nesting places near open grasslands or arable lands where prey species are in abundance. (Lawrence, 1997, 111) The barn owl is one of the most widespread owls in the world, they're found globally, in Canada, United States, Mexico, Central America, Cuba, the Bahamas, Eurasia, Asia, North Africa, Central and South Africa, Australia and New Guinea. (Lawrence, 1997, 110)

Small mammals such as moles, rabbits and rats constitute more than 80% of the barn owl's diet, the remainder are small songbirds. (Nyagolov, 2003, 51) The barn owl hunts for its prey at dusk, gliding silently and usually flying against the wind so as to slow down their glides. (Lawrence, 1997, 113)

Even for a predator, the barn owl appears to be exceptionally inactive. (Bunn, 1982, 54) They often perch motionlessly on one leg in their roosting barn for long periods. (Bunn, 1982, 54) The barn owl is famous for their sudden, high-pitched screams in the dark night. (Lawrence, 1997, 111) In addition, the barn owl also makes a harsh, hoarse, hissing sound. (Nyagolov, 2003, 52) These sounds are used for alarm, distress and courting.

The barn owl is high in the food chain, therefore hardly preyed upon. (Bunn, 1982, 174) However, barn owls often get killed by moving vehicles, it seems the owls are attracted to and blinded by headlights. (Nyagolov, 2003, 52) In the UK alone, more than 1,000 owls are killed this way per year. (Nyagolov, 2003, 52) An experiment conducted by Glue showed that, during the period 1910-1969, 73 of 320, or 23%, ringed barn owls were found dead on roads and railways. (Bunn, 1982, 183)

The barn owl population has also been decimated due to loss of suitable habitat. (Bunn, 1982, 181) Breeding sites and hunting territories have been greatly reduced when old stone farm buildings are replaced by modern, prefabricated structures. (Bunn, 1982, 181)

The provision of suitable habitat is crucial for barn owl conservation. (Taylor, 1994, 243) This is difficult because it involves the encouragement of less intensive agricultural methods. (Taylor, 1994, 243)

Community volunteerism is important in the conservation of barn owls, there are many things you can do to help. Get involved in barn owl nest-building, installation and monitoring programs; identify, enhance and protect grassland and wetland fringe habitats, develop public awareness, appreciation and grassroots support for barn owls, (Duncan, 2003, 188) volunteer to help organizations like the Northwest Wildlife Preservation Society.

References

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