

Cholderton Barn Owls

Over the years barn owls have found a safe home and plentiful food supply at Cholderton Estate. Barn owls eat a variety of prey items, especially small mammals with their favourite being the field vole. Local barn owl breeding success is closely linked to local field vole populations; a poor year for field voles will result in a poor year for barn owls the following year.

The organic farming system at Cholderton creates a bounty of wildlife, and ungrazed margins providing rough grass habitat corridors for field voles. Many nest boxes for barn owls have been put up around the estate, with some being used year after year. There are a variety of barn owl designs on the market but it is fairly easy to make your own! There are three key requirements:

1. Ensure an entrance hole on the front near a top corner, a landing platform is helpful but not necessary.
2. Ensure the base extends to form a platform on the front of the box, with a good ledge/edge all around – a branch will do.
3. An inspection hatch at the rear for monitoring and cleaning purposes.



The first two requirements above are necessary to prevent the chicks from falling out of the box as they rush to greet the incoming parent. Barn owls will only take food to their chicks inside the box and a barn owl chick found on the ground below a nest box will starve.

For more information on how to build and locate a barn owl nest box visit www.hawkandowl.org

As the season progresses and the chicks grow, nest boxes become rancid and full of pellets and the indigestible remains of prey items. Due to this, it is good practice to clean out the boxes at the end of the season. If possible, provide a second nest box nearby as the adults will use this one to roost in during the day when the breeding box is full of huge chicks!

At Cholderton, this year Matt Stevens from the Hawk Conservancy has checked our barn owl boxes. The Hawk Conservancy supplied two boxes through their Fund-A-Bird project (www.hawk-conservancy.org).



On 23 May:

Victoria Barn: pair of barn owls present plus four large chicks

Barrow Field barn: pair of barn owls present with five chicks, one very small

Down Barn: four chicks present, ranging in age from 5-20 days.

On 04 July:

Victoria Barn: four large chicks present; 2 males and two females. Both females weighed 379g and the males were slightly smaller at 367g and 377g.

Barrow Field barn: a single very large chick at almost adult weight; 383g.

Down Barn: three chicks present, slightly behind the others weighing 358g-365g.

There are at least three other sites where barn owls are present and likely to have broods but these were not checked due to their height.

It will be interesting to see how the other barn owls locally have fared by the end of the season, Matt told us that local broods were averaging 3 chicks. As our other broods have done well, it may be that the loss of chicks at Barrow Field barn is due to something happening to one of the parent birds. Barn owls need to find 4 prey items per night to feed themselves and another 4 prey items per night to feed a brood average 3-4 chicks. In a season a pair of barn owls need to find 4,000 prey items to feed themselves and four chicks for 70 days!

For more information on barn owls download the RSPB pdf.

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