

# Barn owl

*Tyto alba*

**Other names: White owl, Screech owl, Billy wix**



## Description

With heart-shaped face, black eyes, buff back and wings and pure white underparts, the barn owl is a distinctive and much-loved countryside bird.

Famously hunting on silent wings, they swoop down on their prey unannounced; a soft fringe along the outside of their flight feathers absorbing the noise of their flight. Undisturbed by the sound of their wings flapping, they listen out for the rustling of small mammals in the grass.

Winter can be a great time of year to look for barn owls, as they often extend their hunting hours into daylight to find the extra food they need to get them through the colder months.

## What they eat

Barn owls feed almost entirely on small mammals such as field voles.

## Where and when to see them

- Barn owls can be seen all through the year.
- Your best chance of seeing this silent hunter is at dawn or dusk in areas of rough grassland: a vole's favourite habitat.
- Like many owls, barn owls find it harder to hunt in windy conditions, so still evenings are best to try to spot them.
- Scan the sheltered side of fields in the lea of hedgerows for your best chances.
- If a barn owl is hunting nearby, you may be able to attract it closer by making a squeaking noise by kissing the back of your hand - the owl may come over to see what's making the noise.
- Don't forget to listen out too - barn owls don't hoot; they screech. Listen to a barn owl screech.

## Legal status

Barn owls are protected by law under Schedule 1, Part 1 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). Take great care not to disturb them or their nests.

## Field signs to look for

As with many species, it is not always easy to see barn owls. However, they often leave signs that reveal they have been present.

### Pellets

A pellet containing the undigested parts of prey items (e.g. bones, teeth, fur) is regurgitated (i.e. coughed up through the beak) and discarded; they are often found in or under a roost/perch site. The pellets are usually very uniform in colour, black when fresh and turning grey as they dry. Dissecting the pellets can provide valuable information about the diet of the owl, as birds and mammals can often be identified from their tiny bone remains. Bird rings may also be found within the pellet.



## Droppings

Barn owl droppings are usually white. Look underneath potential perch or roost sites.

## Feathers

Barn owl feathers are very distinctive. They can be pure white, or white and buff-coloured. Feathers from males are generally paler than those from females. Female wing feathers are moulted between May and August; whilst males moult from July to October. Barn owl feathers are adapted to be very soft and quiet during flight, and their wing feathers have rows of tiny hooks (like a comb) that deaden the sound of air hitting the wings.

## Calls

Barn owls do not hoot, they screech and hiss.

## Similar species

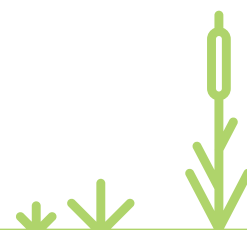
The barn owl is very distinctive being the only white/buff-coloured owl in the UK and would rarely be confused with other species. The table below illustrates how the barn owl compares to two other commonly seen owls.

Barn owl <i>Tyto alba</i>	Tawny owl <i>Strix aluco</i>	Short-eared owl <i>Asio flammeus</i>
Elegant looking bird. About 330mm tall with a wingspan of 900mm.	Stout and bulky bird. About 430mm tall with a wing span of 950mm.	Slender and streamlined bird. About 350mm tall with a wing span of 1000m.
White underparts.	Mottled brown-grey underparts.	Pale brown underparts, with brown streaks.
Golden, buff-coloured upperparts with blue-grey markings.	Mottled brown-grey upperparts.	Pale and dark brown upper parts.
Heart shaped face with small dark eyes. No ear tufts.	Round face with large brown-black eyes. No ear tufts.	Round face with yellow eyes, and short ear-tufts.
Lives mainly in open farmland, and nests in hollow trees and rock crevices. Barn owl will also nest in barns, churches and other old buildings. They will also use nestboxes.	Primarily lives in woodland, and nests in holes in trees. Tawny owls will also use old magpie nests, squirrel dreys, and nestboxes.	Lives in farmland, heathland, moorland and wetland habitats such as marshes. They nest on the ground in scraped-out hollows.
Often seen hunting at dusk and dawn.	Largely nocturnal. More likely to hear it than see it.	Can often be seen hunting in both daytime and during night.
Rarely call, and they don't hoot, they shriek and hiss.	A 'Toowit twoo' call (actually the females call 'kewick' and males respond with a 'hoohoo').	Rarely call, but males 'boo-boo-boo-boo-boo' whilst females give a 'ree-yow' call.
Mainly eat small mammals.	Mainly eat small mammals and birds.	Mainly eat small mammals and birds.

## Did you know?

Barn owl feather are not very waterproof due to their adaptations to make them very soft and silent during flight. They are therefore unable to hunt during wet weather as their feathers become waterlogged; and can often starve during long periods of bad weather.

The collective noun for a group of owls is a parliament!



## Other surveys

Big Garden Birdwatch: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch/>

BTO Tawny Owl Survey: <https://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/project-owl>

Other BTO Surveys: <https://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/surveys>

## Links

ARKive: <https://www.arkive.org/barn-owl/tyto-alba/>

RSPB: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/barn-owl/>

The Barn Owl Trust: <https://www.barnowltrust.org.uk/>

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO): <https://www.bto.org/about-birds/nnbw/nesting-birds/barn-owl>

The Wildlife Trusts: <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-explorer/birds/birds-prey/barn-owl>

