

The Barn Owls at Lorton Meadows - Frequently Asked Questions

This fact sheet has been written to answer the most commonly asked questions about the Barn Owls. If you have any questions that aren't answered here, please try asking the community on the comments stream.

QUESTION	ANSWER
Do you give the Barn Owls names?	We don't name the owls, as they are wild animals, if the viewers name them, that's fine, but we won't use names in any of our communications about the owls.
How can I tell which is which?	Adult barn owls are very difficult to tell apart. The female is usually larger than the male and should be slightly darker coloured around the face. Adults are approx. 25cm tall (head to feet) and 33-35cm from top of head to tip of tail.
Why are they rubbing faces?	During courtship the pair will mutually preen each other and rub cheeks, as well as making soft chittering noises and hissing.
What is all that stuff on the floor?	They are pellets. The barn owls regurgitate the bits of their meals that they can't digest (bones, fur, etc) into a pellet about the size of man's thumb.
Why are they eating the pellets?	The female is actually "shredding" the pellets to make a nice soft base for the eggs. The eggs are laid onto whatever surface is available (i.e. wood, loft insulation, stone) dependant on the nest site.
How many eggs will they have? How long until they hatch?	Barn owls usually lay 5 to 6 eggs. The female starts incubating the eggs as soon as the first egg is laid, and lays an egg every 2-3 days. The eggs hatch after 31-32 days incubation, and will hatch in the order they were laid (i.e. 2-3 day intervals).
The female seems to be leaving the egg(s), is this normal?	The female will normally incubate the eggs as soon as they are laid, with the male only taking over duties for short periods of time. However, if she is underweight and/or suffering from a shortage of food then she might abandon the eggs for a short while to go out hunting. In very extreme cases of food shortage, eggs may be abandoned, but Barn Owls can breed more than once a year, so they may try again at a later date, when conditions are more favourable.
How long will the female brood the eggs/chicks?	The female will continue brooding the young chicks until the eldest is about 3 weeks old. That means she will have been sitting on the nest for a total of nine weeks, and will have relied on her mate for food during all this time.
How many chicks will survive?	The number of chicks that survive is directly related to the amount of prey their parents can catch. Things that can effect this are quality of the habitat, how much prey there is in the area, the weather (see later question) and how experienced the individual parents are.
When will the chicks leave the nest?	Chicks usually start flying at 9-10 weeks, returning to roost for a week or two. They usually start to leave the nest for good when they are about 11-12 weeks. Almost all will have left by 14 wks.
What do they eat?	Voles, mice and shrews are the most popular prey and are usually swallowed whole. Very occasionally they will eat other food items, but their diet in the UK consists mainly of rodents. In other areas of the world Barn Owls are also known to eat amphibians, reptiles, insects, birds, bats, rabbits, earth worms and carrion.
Where is the webcam?	The camera is attached to a barn owl nest box, situated in a restored, converted barn which is now a Conservation Centre, at Lorton Meadows Nature Reserve.

Where is Lorton Meadows?	You can find directions and further information about this beautiful nature reserve by clicking on Lorton Meadows Reserve & Conservation Centre .
How long have the Barn Owls been nesting at Lorton Meadows?	The first barn owl box was constructed in 2004, when the barn was restored/rebuilt and became the Conservation Centre. From 2005 solitary barn owls used the box as a roost, almost year round. Then on 14 th March 2010, the male (who had been roosting here for approximately 2 years) was joined by a female. They successfully raised 3 owlets later that summer. Since then there have been nesting barn owls, but not every year – we're really pleased to have a pair again this year.
I've seen them mating a lot. Why?	As time goes on the male will start bringing the female food and she will spend less and less time hunting. Mating usually occurs each time the male brings the female food prior to egg laying, as part of their courtship.
Why have you set this webcam up?	The nest box and camera, set up by Jason Fathers of Wildlife Windows are part of a larger project based on the reserve to watch nesting birds at Lorton Meadows .
Are the Barn Owls affected by the weather?	Yes. It's easier for the barn owls to catch small mammals in dry weather, for two reasons: Barn owl feathers are not waterproof so the owls easily become waterlogged in heavy rain, finding it difficult to fly accurately. Barn Owls rely on their hearing to catch their prey, rain masks the sound of their prey.
When do they hunt?	Dusk and dawn are the main times for hunting, although they sometimes hunt during the day or at night. It really depends on the individual barn owl, recent weather and how successful hunting has been.
Will Barn Owls come back to the same nestbox year after year?	Once they have a territory, Barn Owls tend to use the same nest site year after year and sometimes roost in the nest box over winter to retain the territory.
Where else will Barn Owls nest?	Nests can be in tree hollows, rock crevices, derelict buildings, barns and nestboxes.
How many Barn Owls are in the UK?	Estimates of population size are commonly derived from surveys, and for barn owls, such surveys rely heavily on estimating numbers of breeding pairs over successive breeding seasons. It is therefore very difficult to get an accurate population size, but the current population is estimated to be between 9,000 and 12,000 breeding pairs (Shawyer, 2019). This can change dramatically from year to year.
What noises do Barn Owls make?	They hiss, screech & shriek. During courtship they also make soft chattering noises as well as hissing. They don't hoot - that's Tawny Owls.
How can I find out about nestbox cameras?	Please contact our nestbox camera supplier Jason Fathers at Wildlife Windows Ltd telephone 01202 461969
I believe a Barn Owl may be nesting in a structure that is about to be demolished – are they protected?	All birds, their nests and eggs are protected by law: In UK by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and in Europe as a whole by The EU Birds Directive (1979). Some birds on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (which Barn Owls are) carry very heavy penalties for disturbance etc. For legal information regarding barn owl nest and roost-sites, please refer to the Barn Owl Trust website: www.barnowltrust.org.uk/barn-owls-law

Answers supplied by Emily Newton, Samantha Dallimore, Coastal Centres Officer for Dorset Wildlife Trust, Jason Fathers at Wildlife Windows Ltd and the Barn Owl Trust.