

This month, Tracy and Hannah from BIGGA's
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Emma Beggs, STRI Turfgrass Agronomist for the North West Region, gives some handy tips on how you can encourage Barn Owls to your golf course

BIRDS OF PREY

Barn Owls are fantastic, mystical creatures and their behaviour and appearance has intrigued humans for centuries. Most people do not necessarily link the activity of barn owls with local authority amenity areas or, for that matter, golf courses. The fact is that this species, protected under European law, can be intimately associated with both, particularly when

grassland management favours their hunting activities.

Populations have declined dramatically over the last century with most recent figures putting numbers at 3750 pairs in England and Wales and 650 pairs in Scotland, a drop of approximately 90% since the 1830's. Barn owls are under serious threat and as a consequence they are protected by The Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981.

These are such fascinating creatures that I am certain many people would wish to do something to help reverse this trend. How can you help? Well, if you are involved in a local authority or a golf course then you can do something.

Barn owls are mainly nocturnal and if you are out at dusk and are fortunate you may see one hunting, flying slowly and silently only one to two metres above the grassland. They have hearing only slightly more sensitive than our own, however the facial disc of loose feathers that gives barn owls their distinctive appearance acts to collect and amplify the faint sound of their prey. Cleverly their ears are offset, allowing them

to accurately pinpoint the source of the noise and make highly effective strikes on unsuspecting mammals. Their main food source is the short-tailed vole although mice and shrews are also favoured food. These mammals live in unmown or ungrazed tussocky grassland and this is where the barn owls hunt.

If we are going to increase barn owl numbers then suitable grass habitats need to be developed to increase the food supply. As custodians of large areas of grassland, local authorities and golf courses can change the way they mow areas to develop suitable grassland habitats. This work will also have additional environmental benefits, encouraging a wider variety of plants and animals. An extra bonus may be a reduction in your mowing bill!

Whether looking at cutting existing grassland areas or developing areas from scratch, we need to develop the field margins or alternatively dedicate whole fields to this practice. On recreational areas it will probably be most practical to develop wide grass margins, ideally five to six metres, along woodland edges, streams and perimeters, although in some circumstances it may be feasible to set aside whole fields to substantially increase the available ground for hunting.

For those of you who wish to try this, the target is the equivalent of 4 hectares of suitable tussocky grassland within a 1 kilometre circle around a nest. Observations indicate that barn owls need this amount of grassland to provide sufficient food to support successful breeding.

Grass margins can be developed

from existing grass areas by reducing mowing frequency to once every three years or so. Even better if you can sow a native grass seed mix, these are becoming more widely available through the main seed companies. Choose a grass mix which most accurately resembles original grassland in your local area and try to include grasses such as false-brome (*Brachipodium* spp.), field brome (*Bromus* spp.), and tall or false oatgrass (*Arrhenatherum* spp.). Newly seeded areas would probably need to be mown annually during the first two years to keep down weed populations, however after this initial establishment phase one cut every three years or so should be appropriate. A suitable height of cut for these areas would be approximately 100 mm.

If you are planning a mowing regime based on these principles, avoid cutting all of the grassland strips in the same year - cutting needs to be staggered to maintain the food supply.





Some thought also needs to be given to connecting your grassland corridors with those on adjacent land. This has a dual purpose, both in joining suitable feeding habitats across wider areas as well as reconnecting isolated pockets of barn owl communities. Intensive farming methods, the increasing spread of urban areas and development of road networks continue to chop up the country into smaller pieces across which barn owls and other wildlife find it increasingly difficult to travel. Unless young birds can explore further afield to find new territories and mate, the population will suffer further decline. Indeed, only about one in four young barn owls survive to become breeding adults and at best will reach their fifth birthday, hence the need to help them becomes that much more apparent.

When you have developed the grassland, all that remains is to pro-

vide the owls with somewhere to live and some hunting posts.

Barn owl numbers have declined in part due to the loss of nesting sites as agricultural buildings have been converted or demolished and old trees have been removed. The good news is that barn owls happily use man-made nest boxes if these are placed in the right spots, adjacent to their favoured habitat. Wooden, waterproof boxes on poles situated in pairs along woodland margins prove successful, as do nest boxes sited within suitable buildings. When constructing new buildings adjacent to grassland areas you could consider including a barn owl nest box within the design.

Barn Owls also need the occasional post along the grass margins to provide places for post hunting on wet and windy days. Although the cleverly designed feathers allow for silent flight, the minus is that they are not waterproof!

If you are able to provide favourable habitats it is likely that you will be successful in attracting barn owls, fortunately they are capable of rapid population expansion once the conditions are right.

If you are interested in these initiatives there are many local groups across the UK who will be happy to advise local authorities, golf courses and other landowners on appropriate habitat development, including the design and siting of nest boxes. Here on the Wirral we are fortunate to have the Wirral & Ellesmere Port Barn Owl Group who can be contacted through PO Box 114, Hoylake, Wirral CH48 8BX or via email WEPBarnOwlGroup@aol.com. The Barn Owl Trust, Waterleat, Ashburton, Devon TQ13 7HU, www.barnowltrust.org.uk or Chris Green, Barn Owl Project Officer at Cheshire Wildlife Trust, email: cgreen@cheshirewt.cix.co.uk are also worth contacting for further infor-

mation. In addition, there are grants available to assist in this work, contact the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group; telephone 01203 696699 and The Wildlife Trust; telephone 01636 677711 for up-to-date information.

You can make a difference and what could be more worthwhile than assisting one of our most impressive native species. It will take some thought, planning and a little effort yet users of these recreational areas, be they footballers, golfers or families out enjoying a late afternoon walk, could then be lucky enough to see one of these superb creatures.

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