

## Guidance for landowners

### Important considerations before installing a barn owl nest box

#### The benefits of barn owl nest boxes

The barn owl is a bird poorly adapted for hunting in prolonged rain, when its soft, little-oiled feathers rapidly become saturated, making hunting difficult. In spring and summer, heavy rainfall can influence breeding success by reducing the amount of food which is provided by the male to the brooding female and dependent young.

In addition, wet, ill chosen nest sites can rapidly lead to the death of young fledglings as a consequence of chilling and disease. For a species that is susceptible to wet conditions, it is not at all surprising that one of the most important requirements for breeding is a site which remains secure and well sheltered from the elements – nest boxes provide just that.

#### Is there evidence of barn owl presence?

Are there regular barn owl sightings over the proposed site or in the immediate local area? Are there signs of barn owl presence on site? If so, this is a good indication that the area is potentially suitable for breeding barn owls. Although there may be barn owls, there does need to be sufficient barn owl hunting habitat to sustain breeding barn owls.

#### Signs of Barn Owls

##### Droppings or 'whitewash'

These are found below the site where the owls perch - these appear as large white splashes on the floor or as vertical lines running down roof timbers.

##### Pellets

These are the regurgitated indigestible parts of the owl's food and are formed of compressed fur and bone. Although other birds also produce pellets, barn owl pellets are easily recognisable. They appear black when fresh, usually with rounded ends and vary in size from thumbnail size to whole thumb size. When old they appear greyish.

##### Feathers

These are distinctive as they appear white, or white with brown colouration on one side. The presence of freshly moulted feathers is a clear indication that the bird is present during the summer.

### **Do you have habitat that meets the needs of breeding barn owls?**

Food supply and the availability of nest sites are the two main factors affecting the long term survival of barn owls within an area. Installing a barn owl nest box must go hand in hand with ensuring that habitat in the immediate and wider surrounding area is managed favourably to provide sufficient food for breeding barn owls.

#### **Ideal barn owl hunting habitat**

- Rough, tussocky grassland with tall grass or dense grassy ground cover, which supports an abundance of small mammals
- Marshland or watercourses
- Wide rough grassy margins or ditches (ideally 6m+ wide to sustain breeding small mammal populations)
- Grass that remains uncut for long periods of time (ideally topped every 2/3 years) or grass that is not intensively grazed
- Open habitat (not within woodland) - an open area that is largely free from obstructions, giving a smooth flightpath for the barn owl, both in hunting and entry into the nest box. Barn owls characteristically fly low to the ground, and their flight path into a nest box will be swooping 'up and into' the nest box entrance hole
- Interconnecting grassland corridors into the wider surrounding area up to a 2km radius from the nest site

There needs to be a good area of rough grassland which is currently managed favourably for barn owl hunting to sustain breeding barn owls. The more rough grassland available, the more likely that there will be enough feeding opportunities for barn owls in the area and that breeding will be successful.

### Do you have a suitable site to locate a barn owl nest box?

The correct positioning of your nest box is important too increase the prospects of attracting barn owls to breed in your nest box. You must also consider the safety of the proposed nest site for barn owls and for Barn Owl Monitors access for checking the nest box.

#### Ideal site for your barn owl nest box

- Overlooking barn owl hunting habitat
- Open habitat - clear of obstructions
- Facing away from hazards such as busy roads and water troughs.

Roads are the largest cause of barn owl mortality with minor road accidents killing young barn owls after they have fledged and major roads killing adult birds that survived fledging and dispersal. Boxes should be sited facing away from minor roads, and not within 1km of a dual carriageway. Whilst this can be partially remedied by growing tall hedges as a boundary between busy roads and barn owl hunting habitat, it is difficult to avoid gaps in hedgerows, such as gateways, which barn owls will naturally swoop low through.

Water troughs are a significant cause of drowning in barn owls. For further guidance on how to make water troughs safe for barn owls please see the Barn Owl Trust factsheet *How to Prevent Drowning*.

- There needs to be a suitable position for the barn owl nest box such as a tree/building or pole as follows:

A mature tree on which to site an A-frame barn owl nest box (see Suffolk Wildlife Trust factsheets *How to make and install your own barn owl nest box* and *Choosing the right tree*)

A building to site an internal barn owl nest box with fly-in access, and parallel beams high up to fix the box to.

A pole - In the absence of a suitable tree or building - consider a pole box - see Suffolk Wildlife Trust *Guidance on pole box installation*.

- Disturbance - the site needs to be reasonably secluded/unlikely to be disturbed regularly. Barn owls are protected by law from disturbance at the nest whilst breeding. It is an offence to intentionally disturb breeding barn owls. Disturbance is only permitted by specially trained and licensed Barn Owl Monitors. Avoid an area that is likely to be disturbed during the main breeding season (March to October).
- The box is accessible and safe for Barn Owl Monitoring.

Access - the nest box needs to be easily accessible for Barn Owl Nest Box Monitors, allowing a ladder to be carried (preferably by vehicle) to the box.

Safety - The nest box must be sited away from hazards such as electricity cables, and there must be safe ladder access from the ground up to the box itself.

Consider installing 2 barn owl nest boxes if there are available sites, multiple boxes are beneficial for barn owls for several reasons:

- Relieves competition for nest sites with other species that use barn owl nest boxes e.g. stock doves, kestrels.
- A pair of barn owls may use a number of roosting sites within their range, one of which is used for breeding.
- Empty nest boxes provide an important place for the male barn owl to have a dry roost nearby - once the chicks have hatched the female does not allow the male to linger inside the nest box except to deliver food!

## **Important things to check before buying your barn owl nest box or commissioning a tree surgeon**

### **Box design**

There are many different designs for barn owl nest boxes but there are essential features to ensure a good nest box design that is safe for breeding barn owls – a poorly designed nest box will cause the death of barn owl chicks before they are ready to fledge – chicks fall out of the nest and perish of cold or because they are not fed by parents on the ground.

- The box should include a landing platform just below the entrance hole
- The nest box should be of a deep design with the access hole at the top of the nest box.
- The box should include a maintenance hatch for Monitoring and clearing out the box from time to time
- An external nest box should be made from good quality timber which has been waterproofed.

Please see *Directory for getting a barn owl nest box installed* for contacts who supply barn owl nest boxes.

### **Installation by a tree surgeon**

- For safety reasons we strongly recommend that you use an experienced tree surgeon to install your box.
- Landowners and tree surgeons may refer to Suffolk Wildlife Trust factsheets for guidance on how to install a barn owl nest box available on the Suffolk Wildlife Trust website: *How to make and install your own barn owl nest box* and *Choosing the right tree*.
- Boxes should generally be installed outside of the bird breeding season (unless an internal or pole box) – ideally between September and February, to avoid the risk of an offence regarding the damage or destruction of birds nests that are in use. The months of August and March may be acceptable, providing the tree surgeon proceeds with care checking for late or early nesting birds. Due caution is recommended throughout the year because other bird species, such as blackbirds and barn owls, have been known to nest throughout the year.

Please see *Directory for getting a barn owl nest box installed* for contacts who may be able to help with installation of your barn owl nest box.

### **Further guidance landowners and tree surgeons:**

Suffolk Wildlife Trust - *How to make and install your own barn owl nest box*

Suffolk Wildlife Trust - *Choosing the right tree*

Suffolk Wildlife Trust – *Directory for getting a barn owl nest box installed*

Suffolk Wildlife Trust – *Barn Owl Monitoring*

Barn Owl Trust – *How to Prevent Drowning*

For further guidance please contact

Suffolk Wildlife Trust 01473 890089 [info@suffolkwildlifetrust.org](mailto:info@suffolkwildlifetrust.org)