

Tales from Hillside Farm

Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*



December 2021

Bird of the Month

Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*

About the Tawny Owl

It has been thought that Tawny Owls were a stable, thriving population so there was limited research into their numbers. Unfortunately however the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) recently suggested that a 27% decline in Tawny Owls has occurred since 1994. The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) are to further investigate their decline but it has now dropped from a green to amber listed conservation status.

Their call is actually the combined calls of the male and female. The male makes the “woo” and the female makes the “ti-wit/kewick” sound. Now is a good time to hear Tawny Owls.

Tawny Owls are approximately 37-39cm in length with a Wingspan of 94-104cm and weighing around 330-590g. There are around 50,000 breeding pairs in the UK. They lay their 2/3 eggs between March and May. Incubated by the female for around 30 days, the male brings food during this period. The hatchlings fledge at between 35-39 days, as little as a year later they fully mature and start looking for a mate. Once Tawny Owls have fledged they find their own territories where they will stay for the rest of their lives. This new territory will be close to the site where they hatched.

This is a particularly adaptable species and its diet can include small mammals, rodents, small birds, frogs, fish, insects and worms. Research shows that in rural habitats Tawny Owls will mainly eat mice, voles and other rodents, whereas urban Tawny Owls will primarily feed on birds. The Maximum Age from Ringing is 23 years 5 months 27 days (set in 2016) BTO Ringing Data their Their typical lifespan is 4 years with breeding typically at 1 year.

With a smaller pupil Humans produce an image that is 2.7 times darker than that of a Tawny Owl. The size of an owl's eye influences the brightness of the image created. Deep woodland is typical Tawny Owl habitat, the low levels of light fall below what is needed for an owl to hunt.



Poetry

What The Owl Said To Me - Kate Seymour Maclean - born 1829

The moon went under a ragged cloud,
The owl cried out of the ruined wall,
Slow and solemn, distinct and loud,
His melancholy call:
Tu-whit, tu-whit, tu-whoo!
Like a creature in a shroud.

Across the night in a silver chain,
While a lonesome wind arose and died,
Slow stepped the ghostly feet of the rain;
The owl from the wall replied:
Tu-whit, tu-whoo, hoo-hoo'
With a peal of goblin laughter,
And silence fell thereafter.

Weird fingers of the wandering rain,
Reaching out of the hollow dark,
Paused and tapped at my window-pane,--
A muffled voice cried, Hark!
Tu-whit, tu-whit, tu-whoo!
The moon is drowned in the dark,
And the world belongs to me and you!



The Owls And Sparrow By John Gay born 30 June 1685

Two pompous owls together sat
In the solemnity of chat:

"Respect to wisdom, all is fled;
The Grecian sages all are dead.
They gave our fathers honour due;
The dignity of owls they knew.
Upon our merit they conferred
The title of 'The Athenian bird.'"

"Brother, they did; you reason right,"
Answered his chum with winking sight.
"For Athens was the seat of learning.
Academicians were discerning.
They placed us on Minerva's helm,
And strove with rank to overwhelm
Our worth, which now is quite neglected, -
Ay, a cock-sparrow's more respected."

A sparrow who was passing by,
And heard the speech, made this reply:
"Old chaps, you were at Athens graced,
And on Minerva's helm were placed,
And we all know the reason why.
Of all the birds beneath the sky,
They chose you forth the lot to show
What they desired their schools to know,
The emptiness of solemn looks.
You teach it better than the books.
Would you be thought of wit and worth,
And be respected upon earth,
Humble your arrogance of mind,
Go to the farmers, and there find
A welcome - foe to mice and rats.
And live the rivals of the cats."



The Owl And The Bell By George MacDonald born 10 December 1824

Bing, Bim, Bang, Bome!

Sang the Bell to himself in his house at home,
High in the church-tower, lone and unseen,
In a twilight of ivy, cool and green;
With his Bing, Bing, Bim, Bing, Bang, Bome!
Singing bass to himself in his house at home.

Said the Owl, on a shadowy ledge below,
Like a glimmering ball of forgotten snow,
"Pest on that fellow sitting up there,
Always calling the people to prayer!
He shatters my nerves with his Bing, Bang, Bome!
Far too big in his house at home!

"I think I will move.--But it suits me well,
And one may get used to it, who can tell!"
So he slept again with all his might,
Then woke and snooved out in the hush of night
When the Bell was asleep in his house at home,
Dreaming over his Bing, Bang, Bome!

For the Owl was born so poor and genteel
What could he do but pick and steal?
He scorned to work for honest bread--
"Better have never been hatched!" he said.
So his day was the night, for he dared not roam
Till sleep had silenced the Bing, Bang, Bome!

When five greedy Owlets chipped the egg
He wanted two beaks and another leg,
And they ate the more that they did not sleep well:
"It's their gizzards," said Owlless; said Owl, "It's that Bell!"
For they quivered like leaves of a wind-blown tome
When the Bell bellowed out his Bing, Bang, Bome!

But the Bell began to throb with the fear
Of bringing his house about his one ear;
And his people came round it, quite a throng,
To buttress the walls and make them strong:
A full month he sat, and felt like a mome
Not daring to shout his Bing, Bang, Bome!

Said the Owl to himself, and hissed as he said,
"I trust in my heart the old fool is dead!
No more will he scare church-mice with his bounce,
And make them so thin they're scarce worth a pounce!
Once I will see him ere he's laid in the loam,
And shout in his ear Bing, Bim, Bang, Bome!"

"Hoo! hoo!" he cried, as he entered the steeple,
"They've hanged him at last, the righteous people!
His swollen tongue lolls out of his head!
Hoo! hoo! at last the old brute is dead!
There let him hang, the shapeless gnome,
Choked with a throatful of Bing, Bang, Bome!"

He fluttered about him, singing Too-who!
He flapped the poor Bell, and said, "Is that you?
You that never would matters mince,
Banging poor owls and making them wince?
A fig for you now, in your great hall-dome!
Too-whit is better than Bing, Bang, Bome!"

Still braver he grew, the downy, the dapper;
He flew in and perched on the knob of the clapper,
And shouted Too-who! An echo awoke
Like a far-off ghostly Bing-Bang stroke:
"Just so!" he cried; "I am quite at home!
I will take his place with my Bing, Bang, Bome!"

He hissed with the scorn of his grand self-wonder,
And thought the Bell's tremble his own great thunder:
He sat the Jove of creation's fowl.--
Bang! went the Bell--through the rope-hole the owl,
A fluffy avalanche, light as foam,
Loosed by the boom of the Bing, Bang, Bome!

He sat where he fell, as if he had meant it,
Ready for any remark anent it.
Said the eldest Owlet, "Pa, you were wrong;
He's at it again with his vulgar song!"
"Child," said the Owl, "of the mark you are wide:
I brought him to life by perching inside."

"Why did you, my dear?" said his startled wife;
"He has always been the plague of your life!"
"I have given him a lesson of good for evil:
Perhaps the old ruffian will now be civil!"
The Owl sat righteous, he raised his comb.
The Bell bawled on, Bing, Bim, Bang, Bome!



Folklore

Greek goddess of wisdom Athena is portrayed with an owl. Homer tells a story in which Athena has a crow as a companion who proves to be too much of a trickster. So she banishes it and replaces it with the Owl whos wisdom and seriousness she admired. The owl was the Little Owl, *Athene noctua*, many were found inside places like the Acropolis. There were also Coins with Athena's face on one side, and an owl on the reverse. If an Owl flew over Greek Soldiers before a battle, they took it as a sign of victory.

A Roman superstition told that witches transformed into Owls, and sucked the blood of babies! Proserpine was transported to the underworld by Pluto and was to be allowed to return to her mother Ceres, providing she ate nothing in the underworld. Ascalpus, however, saw her picking a pomegranate when he told of what he had seen he was turned into an Owl.

Celtic Goddess of fertility rebirth, Arianrhod could see deep into the human subconscious and soul with her eyes when she shape-shifted into an owl.

In England, it was believed that if you walked around a tree that an owl was perched in, it would follow you with its eyes, around and around until it wrung its own neck. It was also believed that the Owls night vision came from a magical "inner light". The Owl was linked to the dead and called the Night Hag or Corpse Bird but was also a symbol of renewal, moon magic and reincarnation. Nearly always female in folklore, the Owl is to be respected and not spoken ill of.

Some English folk cures using Owls, were for alcoholism which was treated with raw Owl egg. A child given this treatment was thought to gain lifetime protection against drunkenness. Owls' eggs, cooked until they turned into ashes, were also used as a potion to improve eyesight. Owl Broth was given to children suffering from Whooping-cough.

An owl feather, it is said can be used for a variety of purposes. The Zuni tribe believed that an owl feather placed in a baby's crib kept evil spirits away. Also seen as bringers of healing and a feather could be hung in the doorway of a home to keep illness out. In England because owls could be associated with death feathers could be used to repel those influences.



Medieval



The entry for the Owl in the Aberdeen Bestiary is as follows, curious as always, it is important to mention that Medieval people feared the dark and the Owl was a creature of the dark and therefore treated with contempt and disliked.

Of the owl Isidore says of the owl: 'The name owl, bubo, is formed from the sound it makes. It is a bird associated with the dead, weighed down, indeed, with its plumage, but forever hindered too, by the weight of its slothfulness. It lives day and night around burial places and is always found in caves.' On this subject Rabanus says: 'The owl signifies those who have given themselves up to the darkness of sin and those who flee from the light of righteousness.' As a result it is classed among the unclean creatures in Leviticus. Consequently, we can take the owl to mean any kind of sinner. The owl gets its name from the sound it makes, because its mouth speaks when its heart is overfull, for what it thinks about in its mind, it utters with its voice. It is said to be

a filthy bird, because it fouls its nest with its droppings, as the sinner dishonours those with whom he lives, by the example of his evil ways. It is weighed down with its plumage, as the sinner is with an excess of carnal pleasure and with fickleness of mind; but it is truly hampered by the weight of its sloth. It is hindered by the weight of its idleness and sloth, as sinners are lazy and slothful in acting virtuously. It spends its days and nights around burial places, as the sinner delights in sin, which is like the stench of decaying human flesh. For it lives in caves like the sinner who will not emerge from darkness by means of confession but detests the light of truth. When other birds see the owl, they signal its presence with loud cries and harrass it with fierce assaults. In the same way, if a sinner comes into the light of understanding, he becomes an object of derision to the virtuous. And when he is caught openly in the act of sinning, his ears are filled with their reproaches. As the birds pull out the owl's feathers and tear at it with their beaks, the virtuous censure the carnal acts of the sinner and condemn his excesses. The owl is known, therefore, as a miserable bird, just as the sinner, who behaves in the way we have described above, is a miserable man.



Fable

The Eagle and Owl from the JBR Collection

The Eagle and the Owl, after many quarrels, swore that they would be fast friends for ever, and that they would never harm each other's young ones. "But do you know my little ones?" said the Owl. "If you do not, I fear it will go hard with them when you find them." "Nay, then, I do not," replied the Eagle. "The greater your loss," said the Owl; "they are the sweetest, prettiest things in the world. Such clear eyes! such charming plumage! such winning little ways! You'll know them, now, from my description."

A short time after, the Eagle found the little ones in a hollow tree. "These hideous little staring frights, at any rate, cannot be neighbour owl's delicious pets," said the Eagle; "so I may make away with them without the least misgiving." The Owl, finding her young ones gone, loaded the Eagle with reproaches. "Nay," answered the Eagle, "blame yourself rather than me. If you paint with such flattering colours, it is not my fault if I do not recognise your portraits. "

Moral: If you lie it might come back to haunt you.



Extinction

The Laughing Owl, (whēkau),

Although not a Tawny Owl I wanted to share this story. The Laughing Owl became extinct in the early twentieth century. The last known bird was one found dead on a road at Blue Cliffs Station, near Timaru, in 1914. They had succumbed to a variety of challenges, the arrival of Eastern Polynesians also brought the kiore (Pacific rat), the clearance of habitat for farming and other newly introduced predators including stoats, ferrets, and cats against which they had no defence, but humans hunted them too for museum specimens, collections and for zoos. Its name comes from its shrieks which were likened to a crazed laugh. They hunted beetles, birds, and lizards,

They lived in deep crevices in limestone cliffs, and probably in trees before large-scale deforestation. Like other birds of prey, the Laughing Owl leave pellets of the indigestible parts of its food. These formed layers over over millennia, and therefore can be up to a half-a-metre thick. A Takaka cave site is thought to have been continuously inhabited possibly for as much as ten thousand years. Forty-three species of native bird, including kiwi and ducks and even morepork, were found, along with three species of bat, seven species of lizard, two species of indigenous frog, some fish, numerous beetles and weevils, and a species of tuatara.

They also show the change in populations of small animals, birds, and invertebrates over time as new species were introduced. As the kiore began to eat the invertebrates that the owl preyed on, it in turn was added to the owl's diet Kiore probably ate the Owls eggs and young. With the arrival of Europeans, associated rats and birds bones become evident. The relics of the Laughing Owls roosting sites offer valuable information about changing ecosystem, diversity and abundance of small mammals and birds in prehistoric New Zealand.



What can we do to continue to protect our beautiful world and its inhabitants?

1. Join conservation groups
2. Support Charities who protect habitat and wildlife
3. Encourage good practice in Fishing, Farming and Land management
4. Vote with your purse, dont support substandard practice in anything.
5. Sign petitions to protect Birds and habitat
6. Share your love of wildlife with friends and family
7. Sign petitions to end persecution and improve understanding
8. Dont use pesticides or poison in the Garden
9. Let the grass grow, insects love dandelions and daisies.
10. Grow wildflowers and plant native trees.
11. Encourage insects to your garden

Some links for further information:-

[British Trust for Ornithology](#)
[RSPB](#)
[Birdlife](#)
[The Wildlife Trusts](#)
[The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust](#)
[Plantlife](#)

The aim of this project is to research a different bird each month. I enjoy gathering poetry, songs, facts, stories and information to further understand, celebrate, discover and share ways in which we can help them in the wild.

More of my work can be found on my [website](#) including greetings cards, prints, printmaking, original drawings, paintings and related products.

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