

Common Barn Owl – *tyto alba*

This medium sized owl, with his heart-shaped, white face and dark brown eyes is sometimes called the “monkey-faced owl”. He has adapted well to life near people and is considered a true friend of the farmers since he limits rodent populations that eat the farmers’ grains. He is a cavity nester and readily takes up year round residence in old buildings, barns, and nest boxes. The Barn owls ear openings are placed symmetrically on the side of his head and a fleshy covering to the ear allows for this owls asymmetrical hearing, which provides acute hearing that allows him to hunt in total darkness. The Barn owl, very common in our local neighborhoods, is found all over the world on every continent except Antarctica. In some parts of their range, the barn owl is endangered, including Britain and parts of the mid-western and eastern United States.

The barn owls are in the family Tytonidae and divided into seventeen species by Monroe and Sibley (1993), of which many are endemic to individual islands, they are widely distributed, ranging throughout the New and Old worlds. Barn owls are characterized by distinctive heart-shaped, sound-reflecting facial discs, heads without ear tufts, long, slender, feathered legs, a serrated, or pectinate middle claw, and distinctive middle ear bones. They are the keenest of hunters, being capable of acoustic location of prey in total darkness (Knudsen and Konishi 1979).



Plumage: Generally golden brown to rusty with gray on their backs the breast or under parts can vary from pure white to rusty brown. Males are whiter in the front than females, and as with all birds of prey the male is generally smaller than the female. Feathers are soft and dotted with lighter specks. A young girl observing a Barn owl’s back feathers compared the specks to sequins. In flight this owl appears very white and ghostlike. Barn owls have dark eyes, in contrast to the yellow eyes of most other owls.

Wingspan: 102-120 cm (40-47 inches) or 3-3 1/2 feet.

Length: 16 inches

Weight: Ranges from 360 to 640 grams with an average weight of around 460 grams.

Vocalization: Does not hoot but calls with a harsh, hissing, and loud shriek (croooh-crooh). Inside the nest cavity young and adults make a snake-like hissing sound which is thought to ward off predators. Adults produce a very human like scream when flying.

Diet: 90% rodents, but will take birds, bats, reptiles and insects. The Barn owl can itself become a nighttime meal for raccoons or Great-horned owls. Each adult consumes the equivalent of a large rat every night. Each owlet will eat up to a dozen mice per night if given the opportunity. With a normal nest containing six young, parent birds must

capture up to 74 rodents nightly. To capture such a supply of food, adult owls may travel three miles, and may even hunt during daylight.

Nesting: Natural barn owl nest sites include tree cavities, burrows, and rock crevices, but as these are disappearing with human habitation, so the owls have adapted to use barns, cracks formed by hay bales, palm trees, church steeples, and human-made nest boxes. Barn owls do not construct nests; they simply lay their eggs in a small depression scraped in loose substrate. The regurgitated pellets will form a layer of soft bedding for the eggs and young. Barn owls may lay up to 11 eggs, but normally four to seven eggs. The female begins incubation when the first egg is laid, unlike most other birds, which delay incubation until all the eggs are laid to cause simultaneous hatching. Barn owls lay subsequent eggs every two or three days. Eggs hatch after 24 to 28 days of incubation. Every 2 to 3 days a new egg hatches. Male Barn owls are kept extremely busy bringing food to incubating females. The first owlet hatched may be 6 to 18 days older than its youngest nest mate. By the time the last egg hatches, the oldest chick may be two weeks old. A newly hatched barn owl chick will only weigh about 20 grams or 3/4 ounce. The eyes are closed and its body is covered with a thin coat of down. It depends completely on its mother for warmth, food and protection for the first two weeks after hatching. They grow rapidly and at about two weeks their eyes are open and they are covered with a heavier coat of down. At about 17 days of age the barn owl chicks are standing and walking around on feather-covered legs. It takes both parents hunting to keep the growing youngsters feed at this point. At about 4 weeks of age the owlets are becoming active and jumping on live mice the parents bring to the nest. They start grooming their newly growing feathers with their beaks. By day 35 to 40, the young owls are adult weight and have enormous appetites. Young owls fledge when they are about eight weeks old. The male owl continues to feed them and teach them how to hunt. The female may have started a second clutch of eggs at this point.

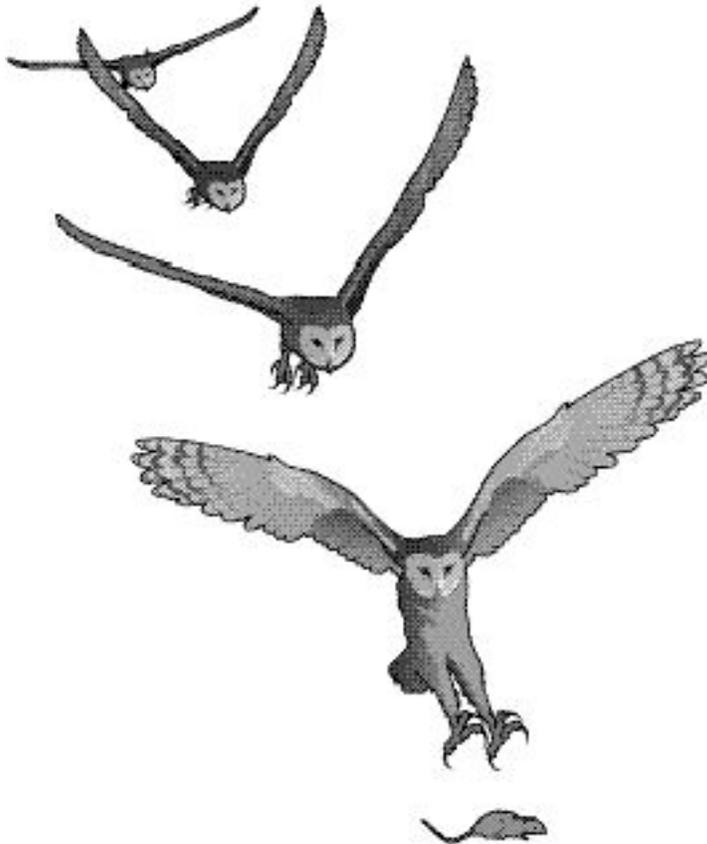


Picture of captive breed Barn owl nestlings provided by Eileen Wicker of the Raptor Rehabilitation of Kentucky – note different sizes and ages of nestlings.

Breeding season can start in January depending upon the weather and the prey availability. Barn owls will have up to three nesting cycles here in California.

Owls swallow their prey whole, but they can't digest the whole animal. Bones, fur and other indigestible parts of prey are compacted into pellets in the stomach (oblong, dark objects about 2 inches in length) and regurgitated. They regurgitate a pellet, approximately every 12 hours. These pellets, when regurgitated in the nest cavity, provide a layer of softness and warmth for the eggs and young barn owls.

Barn owl facial disks are heart shaped and play an important role in hearing. The stiff feathers help to direct sound into the ears, which are located at the edge of the facial disk, behind the eyes. Owls don't have a large external ear that many mammals do. An owl's ears are openings in its head surrounded by small flaps of skin. By moving these skin flaps and the feathers of the facial disk, a barn owl can pick up the faintest sound. Barn Owls can hear a mouse under 3 inches of snow.



An owl's eyes are fixed in the socket, they can't be moved freely as our eye can. In order to see something off to the side, an owl must turn its whole head. To see behind, owls turn their heads completely around to the back, first to one side and then the other. Owls tilt their head to one side to help judge distance. By seeing the object from several different angles, the owl is better able to tell how far away the object is. Head tilting is useful in figuring out where sound is coming from as well.

Barn owls have long legs and long, sharp talons. Their feathers are designed for silent flight, which allows them to surprise their prey. The flight feathers have a serrated leading edge, which allows air to flow through feather just like a comb through hair. This combination makes the Barn owl an exceptional hunter, sometimes called nature's mouse trap.

Migration: Does not migrate and will nest year-round if food is plentiful. Most widespread of all owls found in parts of North, Central, and South America as well as Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia.

Longevity Record: 15 years 5 months. Most rarely live more than 10 years and the usual life span is only 2 to 3 years. Because of its slow, low flight, cars frequently hit these owls at night as they patrol the roadways looking for mice.

Tyto is Greek meaning 'owl' and Alba is Latin for "white".

Check out plans to build Barn owl nest boxes on our website at:

<http://www.sky-hunters.org/Help.html>



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