

Barn owl

(*Tyto alba*)



Photo credit: Darren Colello

The barn owl in flight is a brilliant display of warm yellows and delicate greys sprinkled with silver bits which ends in dark buff. A sleeping barn owl's closed eyes give the illusion of a smile.

Characteristics

The barn owl is a medium size owl, with body length between 34-40 cm (15-18 inch) and a wingspan of 87cm (40 in). Typical weight of this species is only 1kg (2.2 lbs). The barn owl is long-legged, without ear tufts, and their heart shaped facial disc serves to reflect sound to its ears. They are capable of changing the shape of their disc to pick up minute sounds more clearly. Male and female barn owls do not appear distinct except the female is slightly larger and somewhat darker in colour.

The barn owl lives in the wild for 4 to 6 years on average, in captivity it may live to 15 to 20 years. Courtship between the male and the female begins in February and includes mostly mutual preening and conversational chirruping and squeaking. Some pairs remain at the nest site throughout the year while others pay periodic visits to each other and meet for nightly excursions.

The young barn owl moves away progressively from the nest area and tends to settle in regions up to 97 kilometres (60 miles) from the nest. Barn owl eggs are laid at two to three day intervals, the clutch size is extremely variable, every number from two to eleven have been recorded. Barn owl chicks are rather odd to look at, with their rough, undefined features obscured by a layer of uneven white fluff.

Habitat & Behaviour

As its name suggests, barn owls usually nest in barns, hollow trees, old houses, and outbuildings. The barn owl is believed to be a cliff-haunting bird, breeding and roosting in the natural crevices and caves that are simulated to all intents and purposes by the man made structures that the barn owl now occupy.

Barn owls select their nesting places near open grasslands or arable lands where prey species are in abundance. The barn owl is one of the most wide-spread owls in the world, they're found globally, in Canada, United States, Mexico, Central America, Cuba, the Bahamas, Eurasia, Asia, North Africa, Central and South Africa, Australia and New Guinea.

Small mammals such as voles, mice and rats constitute more than 80% of the barn owl's diet, the remainder are small songbirds. The barn owl hunts for its prey at dusk, gliding silently and usually flying against the wind so as to slow down their glides.

Even for a predator, the barn owl appears to be exceptionally inactive. They often perch motionlessly on one leg in their roosting barn for long periods. The barn owl is famous for their sudden, high-pitched screams in the dark night. In addition, the barn owl also makes a harsh, hoarse, hissing sound. These sounds are used for alarm, distress and courting.

Threats

Barn owls have few natural predators. One species they are wary of is the great horned owl, which may attack them. Young when fledging can be vulnerable to fox, coyote and raccoons. However loss of available habitat, pesticide poisoning and vehicle strikes are the greatest threats to barn owls. Breeding sites and hunting territories have been greatly reduced when old stone farm buildings are replaced by modern, prefabricated structures.

The provision of suitable habitat is crucial for barn owl conservation. This is difficult because it involves the encouragement of less intensive agricultural methods.

Community volunteerism is important in the conservation of barn owls, there are many things you can do to help. Get involved in barn owl nest-building, installation and monitoring programs; identify, enhance and protect grassland and wetland fringe habitats, develop public awareness, appreciation and grassroots support for barn owls, volunteer to help organizations like the Northwest Wildlife Preservation Society.

Other Interesting Facts

--- barn owl's hearing is exceptionally acute and they can easily detect the heartbeat of a mouse.

--- their ears are so sensitive that they are able to tell the difference of sounds waves approaching each ear by a millionth of a second.

--- British Columbia is the northern most part of a barn owl's range as they have evolved as a more tropical of species.

--- as with all owls, barn owl flight is completely silent in order to listen accurately for their prey and so that their prey does not detect them coming.

Bibliography

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