

## Barn Owl Project



Barn Owls are in a family of their own, and are more closely related to Whip-poor-wills than other owls. Their heart-shaped face focuses sound, and they are the best at prey location by sound of any other animal tested. They silently hunt in twilight and darkness, and roost during the day in secluded cavities where they are safe from Red-tail hawks and Great-horned owls. Their call is a raspy screech, very different from the “hoots” of other owls. Barn Owls can be found on every continent except Antarctica.

Barn Owls eat small rodents, and occasionally blackbirds. In our area, Meadow Voles (“field mice”) are their primary food. An adult Barn Owl can consume at least four Meadow Voles per day making a nesting pair with several young highly effective at rodent control. Meadow Voles live in fallow fields, along the edges of crops, in orchards and pasturelands, and cause considerable damage to agriculture.

Historically, many of Southern Maryland’s farmlands along the Potomac and Patuxent Rivers had Barn Owls nesting in barns and even in duck blinds. In recent years, the numbers of Barn Owls have declined.



The Barn Owl Nest Box

Project is a cooperative effort between Calvert County Natural Resources Division and Southern Maryland Audubon Society. The goal of the project is to increase Barn Owl numbers in Southern Maryland by attracting them to man-made nesting boxes placed on secluded barns in areas of suitable habitat. Contact Senior Naturalist, Andy Brown at 410-535-5327 or Southern Maryland Audubon Society raptor research committee chair Mike Callahan at 240-765-5192 if you would like to help with the project.

Some information included was gleaned from

<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/wildlife/Habitat/WildAcres/wabarnowl.asp>

## Barn Owl FAQ's

- How big are Barn owls?** Males are ½ to 1 pound and have a 3-foot wingspan. Females are 1-1 ½ pounds and have a wingspan up to 45 inches.
- How to ID males & females?** Aside from size, females are usually darker and have small black spots on their chest and belly.
- When do Barn owls nest?** They can nest year-round, but locally they begin in April or May
- Can I put up a box in my yard?** You can, but it would be very unlikely to attract a Barn owl. Barn owls have very specific habitat requirements.
- How big is their territory?** Barn owls have very large territories that overlap with other Barn owls. They have been known to hunt areas as large as 12,000 acres. A minimum of 25 acres of suitable habitat is required to support a nesting pair.
- Do they eat chickens/rabbits?** They will not eat chickens or rabbits.
- What is their nest made of?** Barn owls do not “build” a nest. Instead they accumulate their regurgitated pellets that they break apart with their feet to form a small depression in which they lay their eggs.
- What are owl pellets?** Owl pellets are the indigestible material from their prey like hair, bones, teeth and claws. Barn owls swallow their food whole or in large chunks.
- How long is incubation?** 30-35 days
- How long do the young stay?** The owlets stay 50-55 days in their nest.
- Why is one owlet smaller?** Females lay one egg every other day until her clutch is complete. She begins incubating right away when the first egg is laid, so the chicks hatch at different times. Within the clutch, there may be as much as a week difference in the age of the owlets.
- Do both parents feed owlets?** Yes, but the male does the majority of the feeding early in the nesting process.
- Where do the owlets go?** When the owlets leave the box, they will remain in the area for another month or more while the parents teach them how to hunt.
- Will they return to the box?** Occasionally. For the most part, the owlets will roost with the parents in barns or dense evergreens.
- How many owlets per nest?** Barn owls can have anywhere between 2 and 18 owlets. The average is 2.5 and nearly 30% of the nests fail.
- Do they mate for life?** Yes, they will keep the same mate for their entire lives, but will find another mate if one were to die. There have also been cases observed where males may have several mates.
- Do adults stay with the young?** Most of the time the parents won't stay in the box with the owlets: it gets quite crowded and the young constantly pester them for food. Once the young can regulate their own body temperature and don't require brooding, the female will roost with the male in a nearby barn.
- Why are the numbers down?** Barn owl numbers have declined mostly due to habitat loss. Changes in agriculture have eliminated field areas like pasturelands, and crops are now planted right up to the forest edge and leave no hunting areas for the owls.
- Where did they nest before?** They nested in cavities in trees and cliffs before Europeans arrived.
- What do they eat?** In our area, Meadow voles make up over 90% of Barn owl diet.
- How do they catch their prey?** They have longer legs than other owls and can plunge feet first into tall grass.
- How often is the box checked?** Nest boxes are checked 2-3 times per year. A check in May will determine if there is nesting activity. If so, the young will be banded when they are approximately 5 weeks old. Then a check in the fall will be done to clean the boxes and add fresh shavings.
- What do they do in the winter?** Most of our Barn owls remain in the area during the winter.