

Case Study

Project BOB

The South Downs Barn Owl Box Project

Background

With heart-shaped face, buff back and wings and pure white underparts, the barn owl is a distinctive and much-loved countryside bird. Voted Britain's favourite farmland bird in 2007, the barn owl has occupied a central place in the nation's folklore.

The barn owl is on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, therefore the birds, their nests, eggs and young are fully protected at all times throughout the UK. However, fears about the decline in the Barn Owl population have been growing for many years.

Ornithologists say 2013 was viewed as the worst year ever recorded for one of Britain's favourite farmland birds. "It's been a catastrophic year" said David Ramsden head of conservation at the Barn Owl Trust. Over the last 25 years Barn Owl has decreased by 25 – 49% and is listed as a Species of European Conservation Concern. (Ref; British Trust for Ornithology, BTO)

It is thought nationally that there are around 4000 breeding pairs (Ref, Barn Owl Monitoring Programme, BTO) but following four years of extreme weather, coupled with poor availability of prey, it is likely to have resulted in population of this protected species declining.

South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) Rangers consulted with a range of partners across the National Park, thinking about what we can collectively do to 'protect and promote the barn owl.'



The project

The project aims to protect the barn owl population by ensuring that they have adequate nesting sites and by promoting to farmers the importance of maintaining rough grassland habitat in the farmed landscape.

SDNPA rangers and the Volunteer Ranger Service (VRS) are working closely with local farmers to install nesting boxes and to retain rough tussock grassland around field edges and unused field corners. This long grass provides the right habitat for the barn owls' favorite diet of small mammals, Field Vole, Mice, and Shrews. Rangers have so far installed 250 Barn Owl boxes working with 95 Farmers and Landowners.

The farming community are full of enthusiasm for the project; working together on this exciting project has facilitated the process of building trust between partners that has often lead to joint working in other areas that are delivering the National Park Partnership Management Plan outcomes.

“We put the box up and the Barn Owl moved in straight away! It shows we must have the right habitat on our farm”.

Susie Corbett, Holden Farm, Cheriton

The outcome

Early evidence has already shown that installing Barn Owl boxes has encouraged nesting barn owl where they were previously not thought to be. It has also uncovered a number of other nest boxes monitored by other ecologists, meaning that the project is now working with an even wider group of people, building a better ‘fuller’ picture of the local barn owl population.

Approximately 50% of all boxes have been occupied by barn owl and 10% have been used for breeding.

Project BOB has also been a great opportunity for the SDNPA Rangers to;

- use Barn Owl as a flagship species to aid engagement with the farming community, ultimately encouraging good land management and habitat creation which will benefit a wide range of wildlife including insects, mammals and reptiles.
- engage with ecologists, and volunteers, in making, installing, and monitoring boxes, increasing our knowledge of this protected species.
- engage with local communities, school groups and the general public to raise awareness of Barn Owl, associated wildlife and the South Downs landscape.

Thereby creating a whole South Downs community working together to ‘protect and promote the barn owl.’ A newsletter regularly distributed to all those involved helps to keep everyone up to date on the project and recognition in the national press of the project of its success was highlighted by *The Field*, Oct 15.

The future

The project will work hard to;

- continue to expand the network of farmers and partners engaged in ‘protecting and promoting the Barn Owl’
- Improve the sustainability of the project with increased volunteer and community involvement.
- Use the project to create a wider understanding of and awareness of wildlife and the South Downs landscape

One key to engagement with farmers in conservation is finding a species by which they are motivated *GWCT, 2014*.

Inspiring the motivation leads to long lasting social and environmental outcomes, progressive and focused relationships with the ranger and our most significant stakeholder, farmers.

For further information please contact;

barnowl@southdowns.gov.uk

