

Considering a captive Barn Owl?



LEAFLET No 30

Reg. Charity No 299 835

This leaflet provides important guidance for anyone thinking about keeping a captive Barn Owl.

Over recent years there has been a tremendous increase in the number of bird of prey and owl centres throughout the country. Almost every county show or country fair now features a display of birds which often includes Barn Owls. They commonly appear on television and in magazines and newspapers. This, coupled with the fad for keeping birds of prey (including owls), means that there has been an increase in the number of captive-bred birds for sale to the public. Of these, Barn Owls are usually the cheapest.

The Barn Owl is without doubt a beautiful and attractive species which appeals to many people. In captivity it breeds prolifically - there are now large numbers of captive-bred Barn Owls in Britain. See *Captive Barn Owls in Britain* (leaflet no. 25). If you are considering keeping a Barn Owl we would strongly recommend that you carefully consider the following information before acquiring a bird.

Barn Owls in captivity

Wild Barn Owls are by nature shy and reclusive birds, preferring to spend most of their time roosting in seclusion. In captivity Barn Owls fall broadly into two categories: wild disabled birds unfit to survive in the wild; and those which have been bred in captivity. Disabled wild Barn Owls cannot be tamed. Similarly, captive-bred birds reared by their parents are not tame. The only way a Barn Owl can be really tame is for it to be hand reared from the time its eyes open at about 12 days old. This happens routinely where eggs are artificially incubated and the birds hand reared from hatching.

If the first thing the bird sees after opening its eyes is the human being that feeds it then it will naturally see humans as parents and will be fully "imprinted" on humans. The degree of imprinting depends on:

- a) the age at which hand-rearing commenced in relation to the eyes opening
- b) whether the bird is hand reared singly or is in close contact with its siblings.

Whilst there are obvious advantages to those seeking

tame owls, imprinting can lead to difficulties. The bond between "parent" and owl is never really broken as would occur in the natural state and the owl may never grow out of certain juvenile behaviour such as calling for food. There is also a tendency for them to treat humans (rather than owls) as potential mates or as competitors for food and territory. They can be very aggressive as a result. During the breeding season (which may extend from January through most of the year for Barn Owls in captivity) imprinted males can be particularly troublesome and noisy. Untamed Barn Owls prefer to stay out of sight and are unlikely to be seen in daylight or at close quarters.

Ask yourself why you wish to keep a Barn Owl and what you intend to do with it. If you wish to keep a bird in an aviary simply to observe when it is naturally active, you may wish to consider giving a home to a disabled bird or perhaps to an unwanted captive-bred bird in need of sanctuary.

Advice for those considering training Barn Owls

Barn Owls are naturally most active when hungry. Most of the time they are completely inactive. A tame bird associates its human keeper with the supply of food and can be trained to fly free and return to the hand for food but it will only do this when hungry. This requires the regulation of the supply and intake of food along with the careful monitoring of the bird's weight and response. If you are considering acquiring a Barn Owl to fly free then the methods you would employ would be techniques derived from falconry. To practice this requires an understanding of the bird's nature and a willingness to work patiently with its natural inclinations. Owls are notoriously difficult to train, partly because - unlike daytime flying (diurnal) birds of prey - they do not have a crop - the food passes directly to the stomach and they feel "full-up" quite quickly and naturally wish to roost to digest the meal rather than continue flying. Unlike dogs, which are social animals, they have no sense of loyalty and cannot be trained in the same way, nor should you expect them to respond similarly.

Trained Barn Owls are notoriously unreliable. Even birds which have been flown regularly without a problem can suddenly fly off never to be seen again. On the whole we do not recommend Barn Owls for

training and flying free, and would strongly advise anyone interested in training and flying any bird of prey to seek advice and training from a reputable falconer.

Barn Owls as pets

We do not consider that Barn Owls make good pets. Feathers are not designed for stroking - it reduces their natural waterproofing. Barn Owls have sharp talons and strong feet which can inflict deep puncture wounds and scratches. It is not a good idea to keep fully grown healthy Barn Owls indoors unless you want your curtains and furniture upholstery streaked with long white droppings and your ornaments knocked over. If you want a pet that can be stroked and cuddled then you are far better off keeping a cat, dog, rabbit or guinea-pig which are by nature sociable animals.

Thinking of breeding and releasing Barn Owls?

With so many Barn Owls in captivity and a declining population in the wild, many people are attracted to the idea of breeding and releasing Barn Owls not realising that such releases are an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

A captive-bred Barn Owl simply let go is not likely to survive more than a week - anyone who releases captive bred Barn Owls can be fined up to £5,000 per bird or imprisoned for up to six months.

Life expectancy

Barn Owls are a long term commitment - good homes are hard to find should you decide you can no longer keep your birds. Provided with suitable accommodation and a good food supply, captive Barn Owls may live for as long as 20 years, although 10 to 15 is more usual. Factors associated with ageing, such as stiffening joints and deteriorating eye sight, can affect owls.

Noise

Barn Owls have a wide vocabulary ranging from quiet "chitterings" to their characteristic full-blooded screech. They can be extremely noisy, especially at night. Barn Owls which have been hand reared do not always grow out of the habit of calling for food. This is a hissing "pshh-pshh" noise which they can keep up for hours and can develop into continuous loud screeching. For the sake of good relations with your neighbours and your own peace it is wise to take this factor into consideration.

Sexing Barn Owls and breeding control

In most cases it is possible to determine the sex of

Barn Owls by their plumage. As a general rule, females are darker and more heavily marked than males. Comprehensive details are given in *Sexing Barn Owls* (leaflet no. 23). As mentioned, Barn Owls can breed prolifically in captivity - unless you have a specific reason for breeding, we strongly advise that you take steps to prevent it. For details and advice on how to do this see *Captive Breeding Control* (leaflet no. 29).

Accommodation for Barn Owls

Anyone keeping birds in captivity for any reason should aim to provide them with the best possible quality of life. Barn Owls need room to fly well, a secluded, dry and draught-free place for roosting and a large shallow bowl of water for bathing. For guidelines on aviary design and construction see *Aviary Design* (leaflet no. 12). You need to consider whether your location is really suitable for keeping owls. Is your aviary likely to be regularly disturbed, vandalised, or cause problems with your neighbours? Will you need planning permission? The aviary will need to be cleaned regularly to remove pellets, droppings and discarded food debris.

Feeding

You will need to arrange for a regular food supply and have sufficient freezer space available for storage - please see *Feeding Barn Owls* (leaflet no. 13). Owls will need to be fed daily and any discarded food collected and disposed of. Whilst they do not drink much water, (their moisture requirement largely comes from their food) Barn Owls do bathe occasionally and a suitably wide shallow container of fresh water should be provided at all times.

Health and veterinary care

It is necessary to keep an eye on the birds to ensure that they remain healthy. You will need to know how to handle them correctly both for their safety and your own. Every so often they will have to be checked over to ensure they are free from parasites and not underweight. The beak and talons should be checked and any excess growth trimmed. The feet should be checked, particularly the soles, for signs of bumblefoot. This can be a persistent problem with birds of prey and owls in captivity, the likelihood of which can be greatly reduced by providing a variety of perching surfaces and keeping them clean. Illness in birds is often difficult to detect until it has reached a quite advanced stage. The first sign of trouble is usually a loss of appetite and general disinterest in things. If problems are apparent you will need to act quickly to take the owl to a veterinarian who has experience in treating birds. As with most creatures, it is quite likely that owls will need veterinary care at some point in their life.

Holiday care

Your Barn Owls will need to be cared for in your absence. It is not always easy to find suitable people to do this for you - they will need not only to be able to put out food for the birds, but also be willing and able to deal effectively with any problems which might arise while you are away. It is not advisable with Barn Owls (or any other creature in your care) to simply provide sufficient food for a few days and leave the birds untended in the hope that they will be all right.

Unwanted Barn Owls

With such a long term commitment people often find that their circumstances change or that for some reason they no longer wish to keep their Barn Owls. Alternative suitable homes can be difficult (and sometimes impossible) to find. Bird sanctuaries often refuse to take captive bred Barn Owls as they already have as many as they can accommodate. In recent years the situation has been so dire that no matter how many aviaries a sanctuary builds, and no matter how over crowded they become, new arrivals will still have to be refused at some point.

Some people are tempted to simply let their birds go: it must be stressed that (quite apart from breaking the law) simply letting a captive-bred bird go is almost certainly condemning it to a death by starvation - its chances of survival are very slim indeed. Most people are appalled by the idea of having a healthy creature destroyed simply because it is no longer wanted, however this may well be the best option from the birds' point of view if the alternative is a slow, painful death or years of misery kept in poor accommodation with inadequate care.

Obtaining a Barn Owl

If, having considered all this information, you are determined to keep a Barn Owl and are able to provide everything it needs for the best possible quality of life in captivity, then you will be wondering how to go about obtaining a bird. Theoretically there is no need for anyone to pay for an adult captive-bred Barn Owl as there are so many excess birds which need a good home. Your local RSPCA, wildlife hospital or veterinary surgeon may be willing to put you in touch with local contacts if you are interested in providing accommodation for a disabled or unwanted captive bred Barn Owl. Sound advice and further references on keeping and training birds of prey can be found in *Understanding Owls: Biology, Management, Breeding, Training* by Jemima Parry-Jones (1998), published by David & Charles - ISBN 978-0715312230.

Legal requirements

Barn Owls are listed in Annex A of EEC Article 10 (338/97). This means that it is an offence to sell, buy, exchange, offer for sale, display or use for commercial

gain, any Barn Owl without a certificate issued by DEFRA. It is important to note that in this context 'commercial gain' does not just mean money changing hands, but also includes any exchange and barter. If you are buying a captive-bred Barn Owl you must ensure that the breeder or vendor has a Species Specific Article 10 Certificate and that the certificate boxes have been completed correctly. You must be given the certificate at the time of purchase and keep it safe while the bird is in your possession. Alternatively, if you accept a bird and there is no 'commercial gain' involved then it is advisable to obtain a letter in which this is clearly stated. Please visit <http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalhealth/cites/birdregistration/guidance/is4.htm#2> for further information.

Article 10 certificates are normally only issued for Barn Owls which are uniquely numbered closed-ringed. Exceptionally a certificate may be issued for an unringed bird which has been micro-chipped. A closed ring is a continuous band of metal fitted to one ankle which is generally accepted as proof that the bird was captive bred. For more detailed information please see *Rings and Ringing* (leaflet no.15).

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The Barn Owl Trust is a registered charity dedicated to the conservation of the Barn Owl and its environment. You can become a **Friend of the Barn Owl Trust** and support our work by making a regular donation. Friends receive our biannual magazine *Feedback*, our Annual Report and an enamel pin badge.

The Trust provides a wide range of free leaflets on Barn Owl related matters. For details of these and further information about the Trust and its work, please write including a large SAE to:

Barn Owl Trust
Waterleat
Ashburton
Devon
TQ13 7HU

Tel: 01364 653026
E-mail: info@barnowltrust.org.uk
Web: www.barnowltrust.org.uk



Restoring the Balance

We've lived side-by-side with Barn Owls for centuries. But in modern times wild Barn Owls have become increasingly rare - and the reasons are all man-made. The Barn Owl is a symbol of our relationship with the countryside: the decline of this beautiful bird reflects our attitude towards the environment. No species can prosper in isolation - not even human beings. All things are connected and if we lived in balance with nature then Barn Owls, and so much other wildlife, could thrive.

How you can help

You can help to conserve the Barn Owl by **Becoming a Friend** of the Trust and making an annual or monthly donation to support our work. If you are a UK tax payer and complete a simple **Gift Aid** declaration the Trust can reclaim the tax paid on your donation and significantly increase the value of your gift at no extra cost to you. Standing order and Gift Aid forms are provided below. Please consider paying by **Standing Order** as this greatly reduces our administration time and costs.

BECOMING A FRIEND

UK Friends: Individual £20; Family (same address) £25

Overseas Friends: Individual £25 (sterling); Family (same address) £30 (sterling)

Owlets: UK £20; Overseas £25. Owlets are JuniorFriends. They receive a personal ID card, Feedback and goody bag. (If children are under 16, please state ages. One or more children from the same family at one address can be Owlets.)

Name(s) _____

Address _____ Postcode _____

Daytime telephone no _____ Email address _____

I would like to become a Friend of the Trust and receive my Friend's pack - I enclose £ _____ * (see above)

I am pleased to enclose a donation of £ _____ *

**UK taxpayers please complete Gift Aid declaration below.*

Sorry, donations of under £5 are not acknowledged without an SAE.

The contact details you submit on this form will be held by the Barn Owl Trust on a secure computer system and may be used by the Trust in pursuit of its aims. Please let us know if you object to this.

GIFT AID DECLARATION

If you are a UK tax payer completing this Gift Aid form will enable the Trust to reclaim the tax paid on your donation, thereby increasing the value of your gift at no extra cost to yourself.

Full name _____

Address _____ Postcode _____

I want the Barn Owl Trust to treat all donations I make on or after the date of this declaration as Gift Aid donations until I notify you otherwise

My signature _____ Date _____

Note: Please remember to tell us if you no longer pay an amount of income or capital gains tax equal to the tax we reclaim on your donations. Please contact our office if you have any queries.

STANDING ORDER FORM

Name _____ Date _____

Address _____ Postcode _____

Please pay £ _____ on the first day of each **month*/year*** (* delete one) starting in the month of _____

and a like sum on the same date each **month*/year*** until further notice to the account of

the Barn Owl Trust (a/c no. 1027812) at Lloyds Bank (sort code 30-98-69) 31 Fore Street, Totnes, Devon, TQ9 5HH

My signature _____ Account Number _____

To the manager _____ Bank _____

Bank Address _____ Postcode _____

THIS STANDING ORDER REPLACES ANY EXISTING STANDING ORDERS FROM THIS ACCOUNT TO THE BARN OWL TRUST

Please fill in and sign the appropriate parts of this form and post it to:

Barn Owl Trust, Waterleat, Ashburton, Devon, TQ13 7HU

If you'd like to receive information by post, please tick the boxes below and enclose a large stamped addressed envelope:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sample of <i>Feedback</i> (our bi-annual newsletter) | <input type="checkbox"/> Fund-raising for the Barn Owl Trust |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leaving a Legacy (full details on our website) | <input type="checkbox"/> Barn Owl Trust publications (full details on our website) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Corporate sponsorship | <input type="checkbox"/> Barn Owl Trust sales goods (full details on our website) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Barn Owl adoption (full details on our website) | <input type="checkbox"/> Consultancy/Site Assessment Service (full details on our website) |