

# The Devon Barn Owl Breeding and Release Scheme

27/4/86

## FEEDBACK 1

In order to try and ensure your continued support for this scheme I thought it would be a good idea to let you know just how things are progressing. Anything we can do (both as a species and as individuals) to improve our relationship with the earth must be worthwhile and the longer this change can be sustained the greater the potential.

Imagine for example that you are fed-up with intensive/factory farming, the use of pesticides, and with eating the doubtful produce of this system. You say to yourself "Tomorrow I'll buy real organically grown vegetables." On your round of the local shops you make a point of asking for organic produce and you go home with a limited selection, perhaps not as large nor as colourful as you're used to, you prepare and eat them as usual. By the action of that one shopping trip you have helped the earth - of that £5 you spent there's maybe 50p which won't have gone to buy pesticides which may have saved one wild flower which may have fed one butterfly for one minute. Big Deal! But do it again and again week in week out and suddenly you find everyone's doing it! Have you noticed how many shops now sell organically grown produce and every-other packet says 'Free from all Artificial Flavours, Colours and Preservatives' there's Bio-degradable washing-up liquid and soon there will be lead-free petrol, and there's no turning back, if you buy these products because they're good for you and good for the earth how can you go back to buying rubbish! There are many ways in which we can improve our relationship with the earth but don't underestimate the potential of one small step. By helping in this scheme you have taken one small step which will help to save one of our most beautiful birds from extinction and will certainly add yet another drip into the ever-growing pool of awareness, awareness of the needs of all living things on earth and of the welfare of the earth itself.

I hope that by giving you this feedback you'll be encouraged to continue your support for this scheme thus helping the Barn Owl and increasing the potential for change on a wider scale.

At 8.45 pm on the 28<sup>th</sup> of July 1985 I released my first Barn Owls from a large dry stone shelter on a farm near Holne in the upper Dart Valley. I watched from a barn some distance away as one flew out of the building and low over the field towards me landing in the grass, and then flying along the hedges in true 'Barn Owl fashion', as the light faded the other owl appeared and likewise flew along the hedgerows, a beautiful sight. Reward at last. Reward for all the work on the building I'd done during the winter and reward too for Mrs Manton who had fed the owls nightly since the previous January. A week later I realised that rats had been taking the owls food one of the three owlets had starved and the adult pair had gone. The two remaining owlets were hand fed at the nest every night and by the 11<sup>th</sup> Sept were known to be leaving the shelter and returning for food. I kicked myself for not for-seeing the problem with rats but I learned my lesson and consoled myself that at least the two owlets were successfully released.

This year will see Barn Owls released from seven sites thanks mostly to the help and hospitality received from release volunteers.

Modbury - Nick Pitts and family received their pair of Barn Owls in August '85. Nick had built a large aviary on the outside of one of his stone farm buildings in such a way that the top can be completely rolled back. The female started laying a clutch of five eggs in early March and by April Good Friday two had hatched. I saw them on the 20<sup>th</sup> April - the pair plus 4 healthy owlets.

Ashburton - Margaret Gethin received her pair of owls in September '85. We had partitioned off part of the loft of a stone barn for them. This was equipped with an owl hole in the partition and another in the gable end the latter having an aviary hung over it. This pair also laid a clutch of five or more in March but for some reason by 20<sup>th</sup> April only one egg remained the female showing no interest in it. We look forward to the next clutch.

Yelverton - David and Sylvia Marriot received their pair in November '85. These were housed in part of a very large stone barn with only one entrance for the owls - an owl hole in the side wall. David hung an aviary over this hole and replaced the solid door with a wire one to allow as good a view for the owls as possible. This pair too laid in March and on the 30<sup>th</sup> presented Sylvia with a piece of eggshell.

on the food-table! Later inspection on 22<sup>nd</sup> April showed that this clutch were the earliest to hatch - this pair and their four healthy owlets will be the first release of '86.

Drewsteigton - John and Jackie Shield received their pair in December '85. There were housed in half of the loft of a large old cob barn overlooking some of the best hunting ground I have seen. John and I had great difficulty in making the area owl proof as the cob was full of holes and very loose. Unfortunately on 12<sup>th</sup> January the male escaped just before some awful weather and was picked up dead in a barn near Chagford ten days later. I decided not to replace this male but to release the female alone later on.

Ottery St. Mary - Mike Luxton and his son Robert (aged 10) received their pair in December '85. There were installed in the loft of a brick building behind their house. Owl holes were opened up in each end wall and aviaries were hung over them. By early March the female was sitting on eggs the first of which hatched on or around the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April. On the 20<sup>th</sup> there were three healthy owlets in the nest.

Harberton Ford - Tony Hawtin received his pair in January '86. There were installed in a third of a very large stone barn with an owl hole in the end wall and a loft door in which Tony cut a hole and covered it with wire (Have you made the aviary yet Tony?). No eggs yet but as they were only installed in January its early days yet.

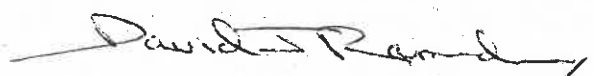
Waterleaf Ashburton - After I had made up the six pairs of Barn Owls previously mentioned I was left with a residue of four which I cannot sex. These will be released from here this Spring without breeding.

Meanwhile -----

All three of my main breeding pairs are currently hatching their eggs. I intend to remove the young at two weeks old and hand rear them in order to encourage second broods. The search is on for release sites for '87 already there are four possible. I have enclosed a couple of leaflets for you to pass on to any potential release volunteers. Out of the seven sites in operation this year four are breeding, three are ready for release, and two await eggs. All together it looks although we'll be releasing about thirty two Barn Owls into the wild this year!

You may well wonder how on earth the owls will learn to find and catch wild food (you could imagine one of our owls flying out and looking for day-old chicks!). Experiments with captive (but truly wild) owls show that the incredibly sensitive

sight and hearing of the owl is designed to detect movement  
first - Barn Owls may completely ignore a dead mouse  
and yet pounce on an inedible moving object. I have  
watched one of my owls swallow a whole chick (which  
presumably satisfied its hunger) and then pounce on a  
leaf blown by the wind as if it were live food. As a general  
rule Birds of Prey only hunt when they are hungry (or  
have young to feed) and yet well fed captive owls will  
hunt. I have seen one of mine catch and eat a frog which  
happened to wander into its aviary. John Shield at Drews-  
teighton release site saw one of his owls with a rat in its beak.  
I believe that any healthy Barn Owl whether hungry or not  
will instinctively be very interested in any small moving  
object (particularly when everything else is relatively still)  
and will probably pounce on it. For this reason I feel it  
is important to encourage small mammals into the release  
site by the provision of food + shelter. Later when one  
of the Drewsteighton owls escaped it lasted for ten  
days and flew over three miles - impossible without  
food. For further evidence read page 192 of the book  
'The Barn Owl' (by Bunn, Warburton + Wilson, pub. T+AD Poyser).  
Of the thirty or so Barn Owls we release this year, I  
hope that about ten will survive to become truly wild  
birds that will cross-breed with other Barn Owls and  
give a much-needed boost to the population, which, will  
need all the help it can get to survive this period, bet-  
ween on-the-one-hand the peak of short sighted  
greedy landuse and-on-the-other the restoration  
of a balance between the needs of ALL living things  
on earth and the welfare of the earth itself.



Mr D. J. RAMSDEN

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Nick Pitts + Family, Margret Gethin, Mike Luxton + Family  
Tony Hawtin, John + Jackie Shield,  
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