

Issue Number 18

# FEEDBACK

1997/98



Barn Owl Trust Waterleat Ashburton Devon TQ13 7HU Registered Charity No: 299 835



## Insight into the Barn Owl Trust



**A Day in the Life of the Trust  
Tenth Anniversary - Preview  
the South Hams Barn Owl Scheme**

**The Barn Owl Trust: Conserving the Barn Owl and its Environment**



# Barn Owl Trust News



We recently released four young Barn Owls from Waterleat under licence from the DoE. They were transferred into a nestbox before they could fly, and their maiden flights were over the office and the aviaries here.

Photo: Steve Panks



One of the more unusual recent admissions to the sanctuary has been a young male sparrowhawk. He was suffering from concussion, but was successfully nursed back to health and released.

Photo: Philip Knowling



Photo: David Ramsden 3

## Double record during Barn Owl ringing

BOT staff have come across two important finds during the 1997 ringing season - one of them a national record.

While ringing in June we found the largest clutch of Barn Owl eggs ever recorded in Britain - and the 12 eggs were in a nestbox erected by the Trust. The old record was 11; anything over 6 is good. The record was authenticated by Mike Tomms at the BTO.

We also found an adult wild Barn Owl that was 8 years old. This is an incredible age for a wild bird. We traced it via the ring on its leg, and discovered that it was the off-spring of birds released by the Trust in the 1980s. This find shows that releasing owls into the wild really works - so long as it's done properly, in a carefully selected site, under licence from the DoE, with thorough survey and monitoring work.

David Ramsden

## Nestbox vandals - a happy ending

You may recall reading in the last issue of Feedback about vandalism at a nestbox in South Devon.

Well, we can now reveal that the story has a happy ending. A new nestbox was erected at the site and in July four healthy youngsters were ringed there.

The boys who destroyed the old nestbox earlier this year wrote letters of apology to the owner.

The owls must have leapt right in and got on with it as soon as the box was up!



Bubble and Squeak were the only two young Tawny Owls brought into the Trust this Spring. They have now been released.

Barn Owl Trust Feedback 1997/98

# The South Hams Barn Owl Scheme

The South Hams Barn Owl Scheme is a major new initiative. The Trust, in partnership with the Devon Birdwatching and Preservation Society and South Hams District Council, is setting out to secure the future of the remaining Barn Owls in the South Hams area of the county through the introduction of a thorough management and monitoring programme.

The Barn Owl may be a protected species, but its breeding sites are vulnerable. The aim of the scheme is to protect these sites so that breeding success can be improved and mortality reduced.

## Local

The UK Bio-diversity Target for Barn Owls is "to maintain present range and numbers and seek a substantial population increase of at least one half by the year 2015." The Barn Owl has been designated as a High Priority in the first Devon Bio-diversity Action Plan. But national and county targets will only be achieved if effective action is taken at local level.

The South Hams Barn Owl population has declined hugely during the 20th century; a recent local study found that fewer than 1 in 50 potential sites was occupied. Site loss is acute; in Devon, Barn Owls roost and breed mainly in traditional farm buildings. Our own research has shown the on-going

loss of these (through demolition, decay or conversion) is having a devastating effect on Barn Owls.

## Positive

The South Hams Barn Owl Scheme is a positive and progressive project. It aims to combat the causes of Barn Owl mortality and implement measures to increase breeding success.

There are two main elements of the scheme: site enhancement and planning liaison.



## Enhancement

Site enhancement will work on a site-by-site basis to improve breeding sites; it'll include things like the siting of an alternative nestbox, securing the existing nestbox, securing the existing nesting-site (so that owlets can't fall

out), encouraging farmers to take up grants for habitat creation to maximise food availability (and therefore breeding success), making sure that there are ways for owls (and other creatures) to climb out of water-troughs (so they don't drown) and encouraging the use of rodenticides that are less harmful to Barn Owls.

## Liaison

Planning liaison will monitor barn conversion applications in order to identify this threat before it leads to site loss and ensure that the birds' needs are taken fully into account.

Most of the field work will be undertaken by Barn Owl Trust staff; the other partners will provide information, advice and financial support.

## Future

The scheme is due to start in October 1997 and run until the end of July 1999. Any extra funding will ensure it continues into the new millennium. Now that the basic framework of the scheme has been established, the hope is that in the future other local authorities will adopt the idea in their own areas.

## David Ramsden

If you live in the South Hams area and you know of a Barn Owl roosting or breeding site, please let us know.

## National liaisons

During the summer the Trust has welcomed officers from other national conservation groups who came to share ideas and learn more about us.

Peter Newberry has recently taken over responsibility for Barn Owl matters at the RSPB. He came in July and we discussed strategies and policies with him and also gave

him a deeper insight into the work of the Trust.

Mike Toms, co-ordinator of the BTO/HOT Project Barn Owl, visited us in August. During his stay he and David Ramsden rechecked breeding sites and also visited a 1990 BOT release site where they watched some of this year's brood of seven exploring their habitat.

## Newspaper Clippers Needed

If you regularly read newspapers or magazines, please take the time to cut out any bits of Barn Owl news. Please write the date and the name of the paper on each item you clip. To save postage, save them up until you've got a few and then send them to us.

Thanks!

# ...of the Barn Owl Trust

'phone or in person - although he does enjoy telling us about all the latest computer gizmos he thinks we should have!

Then there are office supplies to be ordered (that can be a very time-consuming business), the insurance of people, vehicles, the offices and the contents to get sorted out. Too much time seems to be spent dealing with banks, sorting out standing orders and covenants.

Some calls you could do without - like the ones from people trying to persuade you to buy advertising space in their magazines, newspapers or journals. We don't place ads because we can't afford it, but sometimes you just can't get them off the 'phone.

## Juggling

So, Feedback must be put together, the list of forthcoming events needs compiling, the Flyer (for children) has to be finished and the questionnaires for the people who attended the winter nestbox workshop are waiting to be mailed out, along with publicity and information about the next sponsored walk.

Mid-afternoon, and an RSPCA inspector turns up with an injured Barn Owl that's been rescued. David takes it to the hospital room for a check-up. The RSPCA man barely has time for a coffee before he has to be back on the road.

At 5.30pm the answerphone goes on; from now on only the live bird emergency line will be answered. We're poor time-keepers here; no

one leaves on time. But as people do eventually get round to going home, a photographer turns up with bags of cameras and lenses. Photographers both professional and amateur are always keen to snap owls. One of the aviaries has a hide attached to it for just this purpose. Many of the pictures we use in Feedback are taken here. The birds are never disturbed or inconvenienced - it's usually the photographers who have a hard time, sitting hunched up in the cold and the dark waiting for their picture. David will keep an eye on him this evening, but otherwise he's on his own.

It's never boring here; just busy, happy, frenetic and unpredictable.

**Philip Knowling**

## Five Weeks in Devon

*21-year-old Deborah Lang is studying Zoology at Bristol University, and came to us for some work experience during her holidays (which shows just how dedicated she is): We enjoyed having her with us; she was a friendly soul, a hard worker and a great asset. We wish her well, and hope that she'll be back to see us in the future.*

Here I am in deepest, darkest Devon, and loving it. It's a far cry from Bristol, where I'm studying for a degree in Zoology. And it's a lot more hilly than Cambridge, where I live! I want a career in conservation, and so I organised this placement myself to get some experience. Armed with rucksack and bicycle, I arrived in June to do a five week stint with the Trust.

I've found the organisation to be incredibly friendly - and it's good to find that there is such a sound



*Photo: Steve Panks*

conservation basis underlying all the work they do.

I've done a lot of different things here; from assigning each Barn Owl record card to its county district to helping Steve put up nestboxes. I've also been out with David and Frances to ring owlets at known breeding sites. Unfortunately, many sites where birds have bred in the past were empty this year. One site, however, revealed an exciting find - an adult wild Barn Owl that was 8 years old! We were able to trace the owl through its ring - which is exactly the reason why they ring birds.

In between the work I was able to have the odd day off to see the sights - but the cycling isn't as easy as it is at home!

It's such a privilege to have contact with these beautiful wild birds - and to contribute to the work of such a worthwhile organisation.

**Deborah Lang**

# Selling the Trust

You might think that marketing is about soap powder and million-dollar budgets - but it's really about the simple art of communicating.

The Barn Owl Trust needs to communicate with people like farmers, government agencies and supporters. We need to tell people who we are, what we do and then (and this is the good bit) get them to support us.

## Words

I've been helping out with marketing matters since last November.

I write business letters, sponsorship letters and articles for magazines; this helps to raise the profile of the Trust without us spending money on advertisements. Some magazines even pay for articles, which is an added bonus.

## Companies

We'd like to recruit corporate sponsors, and are busy sending out letters to businesses. Most of our support comes from individuals, but companies also give to good causes.

If anyone knows of a company that might support the BOT, please let us know - and if there are any company directors who think their organisations would be able to help, drop me a line.

Money isn't everything, but it does keep the Trust going. Put simply, without the fund-raising we wouldn't be able to keep doing the conservation work. That's why the support of everybody - individuals and businesses alike - is so important.

**Philip Knowling**

# The Sponsored Walk

We arrive behind the ambulance, which is a bad omen...

Monday the 26th of May is a bright, sunny day with just enough breeze to take the edge off the heat. This year I'm the only person from the office doing the full distance. Suggestions of walking in fancy dress have been ignored, as the likelihood of my completing the course in a 6 foot owl suit are low.

There's an interesting array of footwear, knees, hats, dogs, etc. Everyone is welcomed and checked in. At the end of the walk names will be ticked off again - no one has ever been lost... yet. Over 100 have signed on in advance, but more again turn up on the day and are registered by volunteers. There will be marshals along the way, and people whose job it is to drive past you waving cheerily, just to emphasise the fact that they'll be back to base and sipping something refreshing before you.

It's a social occasion; complete strangers chat and children play. Some people are in full kit with big boots and regulation walking stick; others wear tennis shoes. The dogs are eager at the start but flop down

in the shade and slurp from water bowls at the end.

When it comes to sponsorship money, the competition between children is fierce. Adults are more reticent about confronting people with a dog-eared form and a hopeful look. None of the dogs have raised any sponsorship money at all this year...

We set off in a group, but we're soon strung out as the walkers stride and the amblers amble. We're all buoyed up by the signs placed along the route - 'Isn't it lovely along here?', 'Look out for the ducks', 'Beware of the squirrels.'

While some do mental arithmetic as they trudge along ('One step every second, sixty steps per minute... if I'm walking at 4 mph and it's 9 miles..'), others take the chance to switch off completely and just let everything pass them by.

You meet up with people again at the picnic area, swapping notes ('Did you see..?', 'Where was that..?') and taking a breather. There's plenty of opportunity to share sandwiches and discuss the

merits of putting sweaty running shoes in the washing machine.

We didn't see the ducks or kingfishers that the signs assured us were there, but we did see egrets and hear a cuckoo. It's an excellent walk - easy, beautiful, well-organised and supported by the St. John's Ambulance, just in case - though they're not needed.

The final obstacle is the River Erme, which is crossed at low tide. We paddle through the energetic flow, which is cold bliss for hot feet. Then you have the problem of drying your feet without getting sand in your socks.

We toil up the last, short hill, lured by promises of tea and ice cream and foot massages. At the end you want to appear tired in a worthy sort of way and yet not so tired as to seem a softy to the serious walkers. We arrive back in the middle of the afternoon with glowing feet and noses and consciences.

The hard bit is collecting the money afterwards!

**Philip Knowling**



# 1988 to 1998 - Ten Glorious Years

On 28th July 1998 the Barn Owl Trust will celebrate 10 years as a registered charity. We will be marking the occasion in all sorts of ways throughout the year; we want to make 1998 a good year for Barn Owls - and for the Barn Owl Trust.

## Events

An anniversary is a chance to review progress, recognise achievement and look to the future. In addition to all our usual events (like the sponsored walk, draw, letterbox walk and owl night) we're going to be holding special events to generate extra publicity, producing special commemorative BOT items and working harder than ever to get our conservation message - restoring the balance - out to more and more people.

During 1998 we hope to be linking up with groups from all over the country - schools, colleges and



clubs - and involving them in our celebrations.

We hope that many of the schools that we have visited over the years will support us by holding fund-raising events (such as the ever-popular 'mufti days') on our behalf.

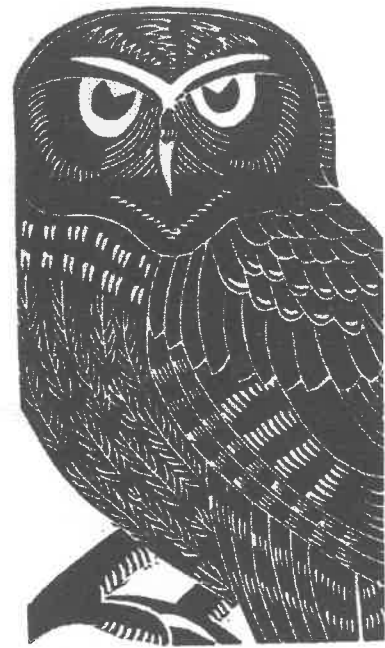
There are also plans for art exhibitions, toys, special T-shirts and other promotional projects. Does anyone fancy a Barn Owl barn dance?

Chris Packham, the well-known children's TV and wildlife presenter, has agreed to help our cause, which is wonderful news. A special 1998 calendar is now available.

## Book

Exeter-born artist Elizabeth Rashley produces striking lino-cut prints, and is currently working on ideas for a special limited-edition tenth anniversary book. Elizabeth, along with her partner David, runs her own private press publishing company, The Avenue Press, based in Newton Abbot. They recently received a small National Lottery grant to publish works by new writers and illustrators.

Every owl lover will be waiting for Elizabeth's book with baited breath; an extra-special collector's edition may also be produced. 1998 is going to be a busy year for



Owl lino-cut by Elizabeth Rashley.

the Trust, because all the special events and celebratory projects will have to be fitted in around our essential core work - conservation, research, information and education. Everything the Trust does is, after all, for the benefit and well-being of owls. So staff and volunteers alike are gearing themselves up for a hard - but we hope rewarding - year.

Please join in, support our efforts, celebrate our (not inconsiderable) achievements and spread the word. If you can, recruit a new Friend, or host a birthday party. Let's make 1998 a great year for Barn Owls.

**Frances Ramsden**

## It's party time!

To celebrate a decade of hard work and success, we're inviting everyone to hold a birthday party on our behalf during 1998.

You can hold any sort of party you like - a tea party, a children's jelly and ice cream party, a cheese and wine party, a dinner party, a fancy dress party, a garden party, a picnic,

a coffee morning... We'd like you to have a good time on our behalf and help us to celebrate the achievements of this charity.

We'll send you BOT leaflets to hand out to all your guests and information about the Trust's progress over the years. Send us a photograph taken at your party

and we'll put you in our scrap-book where you'll become a part of our story. And if you can raise money while you're having a good time, all the better. Think of it as a birthday present for Barn Owls.

Have a good time and help us to start the next decade in style!

# Putting on a Show

A county show is an event where lots of people get together in a big field and see how well they can churn up the ground without actually ploughing it.

The county shows are the highlights of the rural and agricultural calendars in the South West. The Royal Cornwall Show is very much a farming show; the Devon County Show is more diverse, more commercial and more expensive.

## Opportunity

The Barn Owl Trust attends the shows because they're the ideal opportunity to reach all sorts of country (and country-minded) people. We have no visitor centre, so we have to come to you. It's the perfect time to meet supporters old and new. We're there to hand out information leaflets, collect information about Barn Owl sightings and sell fluffy pom-pom owlets.

We take a trailer and a caravan with us: the trailer is full of display material, the caravan is for people to live in on site for the duration of the show.

Farmers love to see Barn Owls - naturally, since they are people of the countryside, who not only work there but live there and relax there; it's where their children grow up. You can't work on the land without caring for it.

## Showtime!

May and June are the show months. There's hardly ever snow in the South West at this time of year - but you need to be prepared for almost anything else. You must judge a show by its hats; are they selling sun-hats or rain-hats? Has the man with the cheap sunglasses packed up and gone home?

Devon starts with sunshine but gets steadily wetter. At one point there's a flood in the stand...

We're in among the purveyors of milking machinery and holiday lets, but there's quite a good flow of people going past, and some stop and come in. We see plenty of friends, both personal and professional; contacts from other environment groups, from English Nature, old friends, former volunteers. At times there's quite a sociable atmosphere on the stand.



We're always glad to hear about Barn Owl sightings; We spend hours poring over crumpled O/S maps with people to identify precise locations. Every sighting is recorded diligently - and kept completely confidential.

## Spirit of the Blitz

This year Devon is wet but Cornwall is VERY wet. When you pay out your money and book the stand you hope the weather will be good - but there's no guarantee. It's rather sad to see our investment of precious funds trickling down the drain.

There's nothing like torrential rain to bring out the spirit of the Blitz in the British. Exhibitors are brought together by adversity; people compare notes on past disasters

and speculate on the prospects of people falling over in the mud. The team on the stand opposite grin when you drain the rainwater out of your tarpaulin and you grin when they empty theirs. The chap on the stand next door sidles over and makes long-suffering comments about how poor the show is this year. We are united by a shared sense of cheery doom. We are buoyantly pessimistic - it's the thrill of disaster.

The ground cuts up and wood-flakes are put down, but a lone youth in a baggy jumper toiling back and forth with one sack at a time isn't going to solve the problem. Then the JCB comes along and dumps a bucket-load of flakes - but churns up more mud in the process.

To be fair, it didn't rain ALL the time at the Royal Cornwall Show; there were gale-force winds, too. Huge marquees anchored firmly to the ground blew over - the stand next to ours blew away entirely.

## Aftermath

The Barn Owl Trust makes no money attending shows; this year the losses were greater than ever. The benefits of being there, of being seen and giving out and receiving information are positive but unquantifiable. At the end of the Royal Cornwall Show, after marquees had collapsed and paths turned into rivers, we broke down the stand, packed the leaflets and the sales goods and the photographs and all the damp tarpaulins back into the trailer and headed for home.

We're not yet sure whether we'll be attending the shows next year; with costs rising and time in short supply, we may - sadly - have to reconsider. But if we do go, we'll see you there.

**Philip Knowling**

# Odds and Ends

## Winners galore

The children's poster competition in the first issue of The Flyer prompted some excellent drawings and designs - there are plenty of budding graphic designers out there.

Richard Paine, aged 12 from Daventry, has won himself a T-shirt. Olivia Norfolk (aged 9 and from Bristol) Philippa Bennett (14, from Southwell, Notts.) and Simon Cuff (9, from West Drayton, Middlesex) get posters and badges.

The results of the bird quiz

advertised in the last issue of Feedback were as follows:

First prize (a £25 M&S voucher) goes to Lecia Foston of Newton Abbot, Devon. Second prize (a £10 M&S voucher) goes to Mary Turville from Hook, Hampshire. Third prize (£5 voucher) goes to Roger and Cathy Pole of Holsworthy, Devon.

Thanks to Rob Hamar of Sparkwell for producing the quiz and to Toshiba for the prizes.



**What can you give someone who has everything?  
Try a Barn Owl**

Christmas is the time to give, and by adopting an owl you're giving in two ways - to a friend or family member and to a needy owl.

We care for between 40 and 50 owls at any one time - owls that need to be cared for because they are injured or because they are unwanted captive-bred birds.

Barn Owls can live for up to twenty years in captivity.

Food and care is costly. You can help - for the sum of £30 a year you can adopt an owl and help support our work.

We will send all the information we have on your owl, together with a poster, photograph, car sticker and newsletter.

And if the adoption is a gift, we'll enclose a card with your personal message.

**For more details telephone 01364 653026 and ask for a leaflet or send an SAE to: Adopt An Owl, Barn Owl Trust Waterleat, Ashburton TQ13 7HU**

## The Flyer

The first issue of The Flyer, the BOT publication especially for young Friends - Owlets - was mailed out in April with every issue of Feedback.

To conserve resources the second issue is being sent to Owlets and Family Friends only. However, if you would like a copy please send us an SAE marked 'Flyer'.

## Gloss - owlets released

The Trust has just released a second brood of four owlets near Waterleat under licence from the DoE.

Gloss lives in the hide aviary here at Waterleat with her partner Dart. She produced one owlet in May which was released with three other young owlets passed on to the Trust. They were released from a nestbox near the office in June.

On June 30th Gloss started laying again, and this time she successfully reared four owlets. They were placed in a hollow tree before they could fly and were fed every day. As they begin to explore and learn to fly, they venture further from the tree, returning to feed and roost during the day. A hide has been built to observe and photograph their behaviour.

### September 1997:

The tragic car crash in Paris occurred as we were starting work on this issue of Feedback. The

Barn Owl Trust sends its condolences to the families of the Princess of Wales and all those killed or injured.

All birds released by the Trust are fitted with BTO rings by trained staff. BBC TV filmed the latest brood being ringed as part of its recording for a recent edition of 'Countryfile' magazine. We hope these young birds thrive in the wild and breed successfully next year.



# Thanks and Things

Thanks to all those who have helped us out with bits and pieces over the last few months.

Diane Young in Bovey Tracey donated some wood which is going to be used for shelves in our workshop. The Groundwork Trust in Plymouth passed on some office chairs - so we no longer have to type standing up.

Alan and Anne Boon have donated two 5m measuring tapes and Mrs. B. Ewing sent a 7.5m tape. Mr. and Mrs. Ferris and David and Barbara Webb donated Portapottis. Mrs. Doe provided a jug kettle and office chair. Thank you also to everyone who has provided us with used C5 envelopes.

## Can you help us to find..?

We're still hoping that someone might have a surplus **video camera**. If you've given up trying and put yours in the attic, we could make good use of it. We'd like to record some of our practical work and use the footage to promote the Trust.

Other items include: a **portable colour TV, VCR, lawn rake, A6 card filing drawers, pincers, woodworking set-squares, a heavy vice for the workbench, a Black & Decker Workmate, A6 filing cabinets, a binding machine, petrol-driven brushcutter, plants for the plant sale on 25th April at Cornworthy.**

## Feedback

Feedback is produced for the Friends of the Barn Owl Trust by staff and volunteers.

Letters and contributions are always welcome. Thank you to everyone who provided words and pictures for this issue.

**Editorial team:**  
Frances Ramsden  
Phil Knowling  
Sandra Reardon



## Tail Piece

What does the Barn Owl Trust do? The simple answer is - we conserve the Barn Owl and its environment. But it goes further than that. When we help the Barn Owl we help other living things - bats, wild flowers, other species of birds... You could argue that Barn Owl conservation is not so good for the things that Tyto alba eats, like field voles, but that aside, what we do has a positive effect on the natural environment.

But there's one other animal that we can help through our work; Homo sapiens. Those charities that work for specific animal and plant species or for the natural world as a whole are also working for the benefit of people. They're working to make sure that the extraordinary wonders of nature aren't destroyed by one over-eager species - us - or forgotten in the rush of our fast-paced, money-driven society.

Barn Owls don't appear anywhere on the balance sheet of Western culture; yet we are better people for

having them around us, and the world would be a poorer place without them. The same goes for all the other species on our planet. We've lost too many already; we cannot afford to keep losing them.

I like to think that the Barn Owl Trust is good for the staff, the Trustees, the volunteers, the Friends, the adoptees, the people we inform, the people who know us, the farmers and landowners we work with, the journalists we come into contact with and, by extension, everybody else as well.

Conservation charities exist because there's a need - a deep and desperate need - to conserve whales, forests, tigers, owls... But they also express our bond with the natural world. They remind us that all things are connected; that whoever we are - politician, shop-keeper or farmer - we are tied directly to the fortunes of the natural world.

The Barn Owl Trust is not the conscience of society; it does not exist so that others can abdicate responsibility. It exists so that the concern of individuals can be pooled, focused and turned into positive action. Most of us are too busy just trying to get by to dedicate our lives to conservation; the Barn Owl Trust is dedicated on your behalf.

Our goal as a charity must be our own extinction. That is, we are striving to reach a point where the Barn Owl is so well-placed that it no longer needs human intervention. If and when we reach that point, then we will know that human society is at last in harmony with nature and that we have restored the balance.

**Philip Knowling**



*Together we can make a world of difference.*

**Thank you**