

# How to manage land for Barn Owls



**Land management is the biggest factor affecting Barn Owls.**

**Arable farming with substantial patches or strips of rough grass is the best type of farmland for Barn Owls.**

## How to create good Barn Owl habitat

- Create patches or strips of rough grassland with a high Field Vole population.
- Rough grassland is a thick, matted, tussocky mix of native grass species.
- Get down on your knees, part the grass, and make sure it has a good litter layer at least 7cm (3") deep.
- Make sure the land is more than 1km from the nearest motorway, dual carriageway or similar fast unscreened road.



## What is a litter layer?

Grass that's allowed to grow tall in the summer and not cut or grazed, will collapse by the autumn. Fresh green blades of grass will then grow up through it and by the following summer most of the first-year's growth will have died-back and formed a "litter layer". A good litter layer is about 70mm deep – you can approximate its depth using the length of your index finger

## Why is it so important?

A litter layer provides Field Voles with the cover they need for their tunnels and nests. From November to March you should be able to spot small holes (about 40mm in diameter) through which the voles emerge to graze. The litter-layer also provides cover for Common Shrews and Wood Mice and together, these three species make up 82% of what Barn Owls eat in the UK. Whereas crops and hay fields are only good for Barn Owls at certain times, permanent rough grassland provides them with food all year round.

With a good 70mm litter layer, rough grassland can contain up to 400 Field Voles per hectare! (A hectare is 100 metres x 100 metres).

Note: In mainland Europe and many other parts of the world, rough grassland is not so important due to the presence of Common Voles and other species that get the cover they need by burrowing underground (Field Voles generally don't do this).





### **How do I manage rough grassland?**

Grassland that is never cut or grazed will gradually become over-grown by brambles/scrub, and eventually trees, so some form of management is essential in the long term. The aim therefore is to control scrub invasion without destroying the litter-layer;

- Low density cattle grazing is often the best form of management but be careful not to over-graze and lose the litter layer altogether! Grazing can also sequester more carbon than mowing and can be more climate-friendly in certain circumstances!
- If you can't use cattle, the entire area can be topped to a height of no less than c. 130mm every other year.
- Another option is cutting alternate strips. In late July or August, cut alternate strips across the field to a height of about 80mm. Next year, cut the other strips in the same way and so on, so each strip is cut every two years.
- The rough grass banks of drainage ditches should be cut alternately to a height of not less than 80mm.
- Small sites can be 'topped' using a brush-cutter, strimmer or scythe, but do be careful not to cut into the litter-layer!



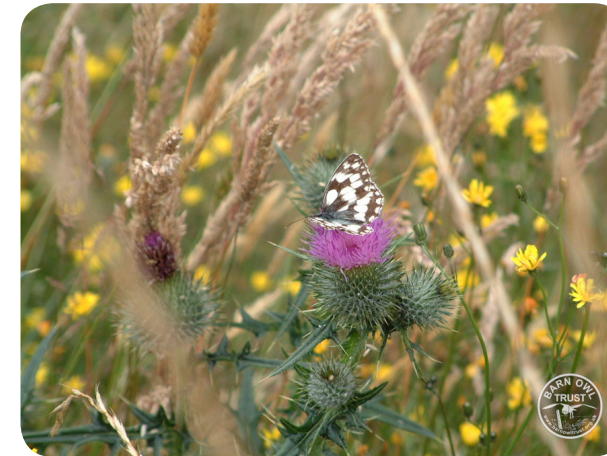
### **Where could I create rough grassland?**

- When grazing areas need to be re-fenced, it may be possible to position the fence away from the field boundary (but do maintain access for the control of scrub invasion).
- When mowing or cultivating, it is often possible to leave a strip around the field margin. 4 metres wide is good, 6 metres is better!
- When planning a tree planting scheme, include permanent strips of rough grass as rides/firebreaks and boundary features.
- In a large rural garden there is often room for a decent patch of permanent rough grass.
- On farms, odd corners of land that are difficult to access by machine are often the best bits. Try to maintain them as grassy.
- New woodlands are often beneficial to Barn Owls for about the first 7 years, due to the rough grass that develops between the young trees.



### **What about a traditional hay meadow. Isn't that good for Barn Owls?**

Rough grassland is a lot better for Barn Owls because it provides a lot more cover (there's no litter-layer in a hay meadow). Rough grassland is also much better for insects and insectivorous birds than a hay meadow. Although rough grassland may be less flowery than a really good hay meadow, the wild flowers of rough grassland, the grasses, and the butterflies they support are beautiful.



### **Surely Barn Owls don't only hunt over rough grassland?**

It's true that Barn Owls can sometimes survive and even breed in landscapes that have no rough grassland at all. However, such birds are more likely to die when the weather is cold and are less likely to nest successfully. Barn Owl populations in areas where their death-rate exceeds their nesting success are only maintained by the arrival of birds from more productive areas and the amount of rough grassland is a major factor.

### **Rough grazing is not the same as rough grassland**

Although rough grazing land may appear very rough, due perhaps to the presence of rushes, bracken or scrub, the grass itself is usually very short. Although these areas may be better for Barn Owls than intensively grazed grassland or arable mono-cultures, they are not nearly as good as rough grassland.

Rough grazing, like in this image, is poor habitat compared to rough grassland.



***For videos about how to create and manage land for Barn Owls and to find out more about whether your local area is suitable for Barn Owls please visit [barnowltrust.org.uk/how-to-manage-land-for-barn-owls](http://barnowltrust.org.uk/how-to-manage-land-for-barn-owls)***



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