

Barn Owl Literacy

Wings of Change - the DVD script



Presenter: "Hello, my name's Nick and today I'm going to tell you about an amazing bird - the Barn Owl."

Presenter: "Many years ago there used to be Barn Owls living on nearly every farm, but now, most of them have gone. Farms have changed over the years and I'm going to tell you why they've changed and how that's affected Barn Owls and other wildlife that live on farms."

... So, lets have a look around a farm - Barn Owls like to live in and around farms, and there's three types of places that they particularly love to make their home in ... "

Presenter: "One is in this, a farmyard barn. It has stone walls with wooden doors and a tiled roof. The roof is high and inside it's dark. There are places where Barn Owls can nest and roost. Look at the holes in the side of the barn where Barn Owls can fly in and out."

Presenter: "They also love these, old isolated barns that aren't used any more. Isolated barns can be found in fields away from the farmyard, and are great for Barn Owls to nest in. There are plenty of holes in this barn for Barn Owls to fly in and out!"

Presenter: "And then there are old trees, just like this one. They often have holes in the trunk which Barn Owls like to make their nest in. When Barn Owls look for a nesting site they look for a good dark hole just like this one. They aren't interested in whether the place looks smart or neat and tidy!"

Presenter: "So, lets have another look at our farm. There are three pairs of Barn Owls living on our farm ..."

Presenter: "There's one pair in the farmyard barn; there's another pair in the old isolated barn and another pair in the old tree. The farmyard is a great place for all sorts of wildlife, as there are lots of different types of habitat like woodland, long grass, hedges and fields. This is great for the different kinds of animals and insects that like to live here."

Presenter: "The reason there are so many Barn Owls living on this farm is because there's a plentiful supply of food for the owls."

"Do you know what Barn Owls eat?" (pause DVD for audience participation)

"Well, they eat small mammals like voles, shrews and mice."

Presenter: "Voles live in long, rough grassland, just like this. This spongy layer of old grass underneath the tall stalks is called the 'litter layer' and this is where voles make tunnels and build nests."

Presenter: "Shrews live in long, rough grassland just like the vole. They also live in hedges and woodland."

Presenter: "And mice live in a range of habitats including hedges, corn fields and woodland as well."

Presenter: "During the Second World War many men went away to fight so there were not many farm workers left behind to work the fields. And ships were not able to bring food to England because of the fighting. This meant that during the war, and afterwards, food was in short supply. To make sure there was enough food for everyone, people were limited to a certain amount of food every week. This was called 'rationing'. After the war had ended, food rationing continued and farming became more and more intensive."



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Presenter: "And so Farmer Joe here, he thinks. "

"Well, if farming is becoming more intensive, how can I produce more food?"

Presenter: "... I already grow some wheat. I've got some cows, a few sheep and some chickens. How could I increase my yield?"

Presenter: "And then he has a good idea."

"I know what I can do. I'll grow more wheat. I'll buy one of those new machines ..."

Presenter: "They use it for harvesting the wheat. It's a huge machine and it's called a combine harvester."

Presenter: "The farmer hasn't got enough money to buy a new combine harvester. So what can he do?"

PAUSE DVD TO ASK THE AUDIENCE.

"He goes to the bank, and the bank manager says: " That's a great idea. You can borrow this money to pay for the combine harvester but it's only a loan and you must pay it back later."

Presenter: "He buys the new machine, ploughs the fields and plants his wheat. The hot, sunny weather helps the crop to grow and when the golden ears of wheat are ripe and ready, the farmer goes out to bring in the harvest, driving his brand new combine harvester."

Presenter: "He ploughs up and down the fields but it's really difficult. These fields are too small. It's very hard to manoeuvre this combine harvester in such a small space and it's taking such a long time to turn it around all the time ..."

Presenter: "So when he finishes the harvest, he thinks ..."
"How can I make this job easier next time?"

"And he has another idea."

"Next time, before I sow the seeds, I'll make the fields larger so that it's easier and quicker to drive my combine harvester up and down. I can't take out all of those hedges by myself. It's too much work."

Presenter: "So again, he borrows some money from the bank."

Presenter: "And he employs a man with a massive bulldozer to come to the farm"

Presenter: "The man driving the bulldozer takes away all the hedges that were making it difficult for the combine harvester to work in the small fields. Farmer Joe ploughs up all the rough grass to prepare the ground for planting crops. The bulldozer pushes over the old tree and then they burn it. The job is finished and the field is so much larger than before."

Presenter: "The farmer is now producing great quantities of wheat to make plenty of loaves of bread and cakes to feed the population. But how many pairs of Barn Owls are left on the farm now?"

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PAUSE DVD TO ASK THE AUDIENCE.

"Well, now only 2 pairs of Barn Owls are left on the farm. The owls in the hollow tree were frightened away by the bulldozer. They flew off and couldn't return as the tree had been burnt down. But at least we've still got 2 pairs of Barn Owls on the farm."

Presenter: "After a little while the farmer is asked to produce more meat on his farm. So the farmer thinks ..."

"I know. I'll keep lots of sheep because people enjoy eating roast lamb and lamb chops for dinner!"

"Just before he goes to buy the sheep, there are two things you need to know about sheep ..."

Presenter: "First of all, when they are out in the fields grazing the grass, the sheep nibble it right down to the ground, and this extremely short grass is no good for small mammals which Barn Owls depend on for their food supply."

"Secondly, sheep have a tendency to break out of fields and escape. The farmer needs to find a way to stop the sheep from running away."

Presenter: "So, the farmer visits the bank to borrow even more money."

Presenter: "He puts up a fence and removes some of the hedges. The fence goes around the wood, along the hedge and all the way up and around the back of the farmhouse and then back down the side of the valley. This is where the farmer will keep his big flock of sheep. The sheep arrive and start to graze the grass intensively. After a few months, all of the long grass has gone. Now the farm has been transformed into large fields with short grass, intensively grazed by all the sheep."

Presenter: "OK, we still have 2 pairs of Barn Owls living on the farm. But, something has changed. Why did we have so many Barn Owls on the farm in the beginning? What's changed?"

PAUSE DVD TO ASK THE AUDIENCE.

"Look at it now! The rough long grass and wild flowers have disappeared. Most of the hedges are missing. The habitat for small mammals has been destroyed so now the owls are having trouble finding enough food to eat."

Presenter: "One morning the postman arrives with a letter for Farmer Joe. It looks important."

Presenter: "Farmer Joe opens it up. It's from the bank which lent Farmer Joe the money. The letter says ..."

'Dear Mr Farmer Joe,
After the war you borrowed money from us to buy a combine harvester, bulldoze the hedges, put up a fence and buy a flock of sheep. Then you started to repay the loan but you're not paying it back fast enough.'

Presenter: "What? The farmer can't understand this."

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"Not paying it back fast enough? That's ridiculous! I'm producing plenty of lamb and wheat, and I sell it all. So why haven't I made enough money to pay off my loan?"

"This doesn't make any sense!"

Presenter: "Well, there's a reason why the farmer can't pay the bank and here's David to explain ..."

David: "Have you noticed how the prices of things can go up and down? Well, it's all about 'supply and demand'. Let's imagine that last night you went to bed hungry because there was nothing to eat for supper. Your tummy was so hungry you could hear it rumbling. In the morning you came down to breakfast and there was still nothing to eat. Then I come in and say ..."

David: "Look, I have a chocolate cake sliced into 6 and you can all have a piece for £1 each. So you all buy a piece because you're so hungry and I get £6 for selling the whole cake!"

"The next night, you have an enormous dinner, and 3 helpings of pudding. This morning you have three bowls of cereal, and you couldn't eat another thing!"

David: "This time I come in with 5 chocolate cakes, each divided into 6 slices and I am ready to sell all the cake for £1 a slice. But you all say "Oh no thank you. I am so full I couldn't eat another thing!" I can only sell the slices of cake for 10p each because no-one really wants any.

So yesterday I could sell a whole chocolate cake for £6 and today I can only sell a whole chocolate cake for 60p!

The farmer is producing large quantities of wheat and meat, but the farmer can only sell his produce for a reduced price because all the farms are producing lots of food and there is so much of it."

Presenter: "Now this is very serious, because if the farmer can't pay off the bank he'll have to sell the farm. What does he do? He worries."

Presenter: "But then he has an idea."

"Well, I don't really need this barn any more because I'm storing all my animal food in big black bags in the field now. I'll turn this barn into a holiday cottage to earn some more money."

Presenter: "The builders arrive and convert the barn into a holiday cottage. They put in windows and doors and block up the little hole in the end of the barn.

Now people can rent the new cottage for their holidays, and this will increase the farmer's income."

Presenter: "But how many Barn Owls are left on the farm now?"

PAUSE DVD TO ASK THE AUDIENCE

"We only have one pair of Barn Owls left on the farm, up in the old isolated barn."

(Hold shot for reflective moment)

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Presenter: "Every year more and more people come to the countryside on holiday. They stay at hotels, camp sites, caravan parks and holiday cottages. This means there are great numbers of people travelling around the country mostly by car, and the roads become incredibly busy. There are long traffic jams. Some people think that the best thing to do when there are too many vehicles on small roads is to build bigger roads!"

Presenter: "Not long after the summer holidays the post van arrives with another letter for Farmer Joe. Again, it looks important."

Presenter: "This time the letter says"

'Dear Farmer Joe, The roads are becoming more busy and congested and we need to build a larger road to cope with the extra traffic. A new road is to be built through your farm.' "Farmer Joe is shocked."

"But what about my land?"

Presenter: "Farmer Joe is extremely upset that a road is to be built through his farm. Several months later he is woken up by a very loud, deep rumbling noise. It sounds like an earthquake. He looks out of the window across the field ..."

Presenter: "... and he can see them. Great big yellow diggers and bulldozers and they're coming!"

Presenter: "When they reach the farm, they break down the fence, and take away the hedges. Then they drive through the woods and they just push the trees over. The trees are 175 years old and all the woodland animals have to run away as their home is being destroyed. And they don't just build a little country road, they build a great big dual carriageway."

Presenter: "By the side of the dual carriageway there are grassy verges. The grass grows **really** long here. What kind of animals like to live in long grass?"

PAUSE DVD TO ASK THE AUDIENCE

"That's right. Mice, voles and shrews. Barn Owls' favourite food."

Presenter: "Now it's summer time.

The pair of Barn Owls left in the old isolated barn have laid their eggs and now they have 3 little owlets."

Presenter: "Each owlet needs a great deal of food - about 4 small mammals every night, which is the same amount as a grown Barn Owl. So, if there are 3 little owlets and 2 parents, that's an awful lot of food to find!"

"If each Barn Owl needs to eat 4 small mammals a night, how many does the male Barn Owl need to catch to feed his whole family of 3 owlets and 2 parents?"

PAUSE DVD TO ASK THE AUDIENCE.

"The male Barn Owl needs to catch 20 small mammals every night to feed his family."

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Presenter: "It's up to the male to do ALL the hunting. He has to find enough food for the whole family. As the sun is setting he flies out of the old isolated barn and goes to his favourite hunting ground ... the old meadow. It's still there after all these years with lovely long grass and wild flowers. He starts to hunt."

Presenter: "He flies backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, hunting for small mammals in the long grass. He dangles his legs down and suddenly, he dives into the long grass to catch a vole. Then he flies back to the nest. But he doesn't feed the vole to the owlets, he gives it to the female and she feeds the young ones. Straight away he flies back to the old meadow and catches another vole from the long grass and takes it back to the nest. He does this repeatedly. It takes a great deal of food to feed a family!"

Presenter: "Then he decides to try hunting in the long grass beside the new road. Straight away he finds a vole, then another, and another! He hunts further and further down the side of the road, but this means it's a long way to fly home. So he thinks 'I'll try the other side of the road as it's nearer.'

"He starts to fly across the road and then"

SILENT PAUSE (Shot of Barn Owl dead on roadside)

Presenter: "The whole farm is now a terrible place for Barn Owls to live, and most farms today have no Barn Owls at all."

"So, what can we do to help Barn Owls and other wildlife living on and around farms? Here's David again to explain"

David: "First, we can talk to farmers and say we really like Barn Owls and they need our help. When you grow your crops and graze your sheep, please don't use all your field. If you leave a little bit for wildlife then the grass will grow high. And then, voles and shrews and mice will live in the long grass and provide food for Barn Owls to eat."

David: "Second, there is a big problem with modern barns like this. They are no good for Barn Owls at all because there is no shelter for them to roost and nest Well, we can create a special big wooden nestbox and put it in the barn for Barn Owls to live in. This gives Barn Owls a safe place to raise a family."

David: "So, that's the story about why there aren't many Barn Owls left in the countryside. If we want to see more Barn Owls living in the wild then we need to look after our precious countryside because it's home to many wild birds, plants and animals. By doing small things like leaving a little bit of land for rough grass and putting up nestboxes we can really make a difference to wild Barn Owls in the future."

David: "You can find out more about Barn Owls by visiting the Barn Owl Trust website www.barnowltrust.org.uk"

Remember, together we can make a difference.

END.