

The State of the UK Barn Owl Population

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The Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) is an iconic species worldwide, but particularly in the UK where it is the most recognised of our 5 native owl species. The Barn Owl is a popular bird when used in flying displays, and for those lucky enough to see one in the wild, that experience will stay with them forever.

Unfortunately, the UK Barn Owl population is in crisis and has been for several years. The trouble is that no one knows exactly how many we have here. The best estimate for a long time was c.4000 pairs counted in the late 90's. Today though, the Barn Owl is the most extensively monitored bird species in the UK. In 2012 approximately 7000 nest sites were monitored which means we have much better estimates for the numbers of breeding pairs over the last few years.

2013 was the worst year on record for the UK Barn Owl population. We know that climate change affects all species (including us!) but in 2012 we had the wettest June since 1766, followed by the coldest March since 1972 in 2013. By the end of 2013 an estimated 70% of previously used nest sites were unoccupied and unused. (*Barnowltrust.org.uk*)

Fortunately 2014 seemed to be a very good year, particularly in comparison to 2013 – the mild winter and long warm summer definitely helped; however so far this year the best estimates are that only approximately one third of the breeding population have successfully reared chicks, and of those, clutches appear smaller than usual. (*BOCN.org*)

Climate change however, is not the only thing affecting Barn Owls in the UK. Habitat destruction is a huge issue across the world, particularly in the South American and Asian rainforests. We hear about this all the time, and generally people are shocked by the figures if

they were not already aware of them. Habitat destruction occurs in the UK too but people don't recognise it as such. Instead they see 'development'. New housing estates are regularly built on old farmland and even green belt (so called protected areas) with devastating effects on wildlife. Barn Owls rely on marshland and overgrown meadows as prime hunting ground. Hedgerows are important small mammal habitats which are frequently removed in order for farmers to increase the size of their fields. Old barns, outhouses and farm buildings are being converted into luxury country mansions, again removing important shelter and nesting areas for Barn Owls.

Our jobs as bird trainers and educators are not just to bring these issues to the attention of the general public, but also to inspire them to help and give them an opportunity to get involved. We all do this every day, even without realising it – just mentioning climate change in one of our talks can make a person think differently about what they do, inspire one person to unplug their phone charger after use or turn off lights in unused rooms or use a little bit less water when doing the washing up.

In shows, we have a captive audience. The people who watch us fly our birds are often in awe of the relationship we can have with wild animals – that moment is ours to use to the best of our ability. A lot of us have scripts for the shows we do. It is our responsibility to ensure a balance of conservation facts and entertainment so that our audience remains interested and focused, and ideally they will come and ask us questions about how they can help following our shows. It is vital that our presenters and trainers have up to date information and can offer this to our guests.

Here at Paradise Wildlife Park in the UK, we have 3 Barn Owls. 2 of them fly in shows, one in a free flight bird show, and one in an indoor mixed taxa show. The third is used for tours, experiences and 'meet and greets'. In this way we can potentially reach 3 different target

audiences every single day. That's 3 great opportunities every day to educate and inspire the public to do their own research, put up a nest box on their land if lucky enough to live in a suitable area.

References:

www.barnowltrust.org.uk

www.BOCN.org (Barn Owl Conservation Network)