



# Woodland wonder: Tawny Owl

Tawny Owl by Adrian Davies, naturepl.com

**W**hile the image of the squat, round-headed Tawny Owl is likely to be a familiar one, the chances are that you are more likely to have heard one this year than actually seen one. This, the most common and widespread of our owls, is also the most strongly nocturnal. A species of deciduous and mixed woodland, the Tawny Owl may also be encountered in urban areas, where suitably-wooded parks or large gardens may be used for breeding.

### WOODLAND LIFE

The association between the Tawny Owl and woodland is something that was borne out by the *BTO Tawny Owl Survey*, carried out by Steve Percival in the late 1980s. This found that the amount of woodland in an area was more important in determining Tawny Owl occurrence than where in the country the area was located. Look at a map of Tawny Owl distribution across Britain and you will only see gaps in the treeless fens and in some of the more upland parts of north-west Scotland.

The species shows some obvious adaptations to its woodland way of life; the short, broad wings and short tail help the owl to manoeuvre through the trees, while the mix of brown and grey plumage provides suitable camouflage for when the owl perches

up against a tree trunk. Interestingly, there are some exceptional instances of Tawny Owls making use of open country, choosing to nest in a quarry face or a disused farm building.

Woodland Tawny Owls feed mainly on small mammals, notably Wood Mouse and Bank Vole, but will also take other prey species if they happen to be available. Amphibians, bats and even fish have been recorded being taken by Tawny Owls. In urbanised landscapes, the owls seem to take more small birds, attacking roosting House Sparrows and Starlings. A few individual Tawny Owls have also been reported attacking House Martin nests, breaking these mud nests open at night to get at the chicks within. One other possibly surprising component of the Tawny Owl diet is earthworms, the owl taking them from the ground on wet nights when the worms emerge to pull leaf litter down into their burrows.

### SEEING IN THE DARK

While the Tawny Owl's visual capacities are considerably better than our own, it cannot see in complete darkness. However, it is sufficiently well equipped to be able to navigate its way around under the woodland canopy on all but the most overcast nights. In addition to its large eyes, the owl also possesses excellent hearing which helps it to locate



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potential prey from a favoured perch. While the notion of the Tawny Owl as a 'sit and wait predator' is true for woodland populations, those found in more open territory will often hunt on the wing, quartering the ground in a similar manner to a Barn Owl, Long-eared Owl or Short-eared Owl.

One other factor contributes to the Tawny Owl's success as a woodland hunter, and that is its spatial memory. Research has revealed that the Tawny Owl has an excellent spatial memory (though not as good as our own or indeed that of other apes) but certainly better than most other birds that have been tested. Couple a strongly territorial and sedentary nature with a good spatial memory and you have the opportunity to develop and retain an excellent 'knowledge' of where to find prey in a given area. Even so, an examination of Tawny Owls brought into rehabilitation centres suggests that collisions with branches are not that unusual.

Tawny Owl by Steve Round



## NOCTURNAL WAILINGS

Tawny Owls can produce a surprising range of calls in addition to the familiar territorial hooting in which they indulge at this time of the year. After the silence of September and early October, when pairs are completing their annual moult, inexperienced youngsters begin to compete with established pairs and the autumnal night air becomes punctuated with various wails and screeches.

The call that is most often thought of as being delivered by a Tawny Owl is 'tu-whit, tu-who'. However, this phrase is a misrepresentation, possibly derived from some lines which appear in Love's Labour's Lost (Act 5, Scene II) by Shakespeare. It seems likely that Shakespeare was adapting the overlapping calls of male and female into a form that fitted his verse. In reality the main territorial call is a drawn-out three sectional hoot: 'hooo...hu...huhuhoo', delivered by the male. The female is known to make a similar call, often truncated and always higher in pitch and more hoarse in delivery. The male will use his call, or some variant of it, to proclaim territorial ownership, court his mate and announce to the female that he is about to deliver some prey to her.

The rather soft 'kiuk' calls produced by both sexes probably have a contact function, as does the harsher 'kee-wik' call, although some authors have suggested that this may also serve to express aggression. Young birds, newly emerged from the nest cavity, but still reliant on their parents for food, are particularly vocal in their efforts to beg for food from their parents.

## SWEETNESS AND LIGHT?

Eric Hosking, one of our greatest wildlife photographers, famously lost an eye to a Tawny Owl and it is little surprise that the species has something of a reputation for displaying aggression around the nest. Some owl fieldworkers have suggested that female Tawny Owls (it is invariably the female that delivers a robust nest defence) are more aggressive if nesting in areas close to human habitation, while those in remote areas are docile around the nest. My own experience of Tawny Owls is that you should always treat these birds with respect.

Incidents of Tawny Owl aggression have also been seen to involve other creatures. On one occasion a Red Fox, which seemingly posed no threat at all, was attacked and driven off by a nesting female. In contrast to this, however, is the way in which female Tawny Owls may remain on the nest if disturbed.

# FACTBOX : Tawny Owl

There are a number of cases where a Tawny Owl busy incubating its eggs was entombed in a nesting cavity by Jackdaws which built their nest directly on top of the sitting bird.

## STAY AT HOME IT'S DANGEROUS OUT THERE

The sedentary nature of the Tawny Owl has already been touched upon. However, it is not just adult Tawny Owls that are sedentary in their habits. Young birds, dispersing away from where they were born, rarely move far, the average distance moved being just four kilometres (just over two miles). There also appears to be some reluctance to cross large waterbodies. The Tawny Owl is absent from many of the islands around our shores, with only occasional records of the species reported from Ireland and the Isle of Wight.

Young Tawny Owls face a difficult time once they leave home, with two out of every three likely to die within their first year. With such high mortality levels it is a good job that established pairs can produce young over a number of breeding seasons, maximising their chances of passing their genes onto the next generation of owls. The young Tawny Owls may struggle to establish themselves as territory owners, facing competition from experienced territory-holders.

## FACT AND FICTION

The Tawny Owl was once viewed as a bird of ill omen, its nocturnal hootings thought to foretell a death in the household. For this reason they were shunned and feared by many. It was the doleful cry of an Owl that Shakespeare had pierce the ear of Lady Macbeth at the time of the murder:

*It was the owl that shrieked,  
the fatal bellman  
which give stern'st good-night.*

Like other owls, there is often an association with dark magic; the owl as a witch's familiar or, in Gaelic as Caillaech oidhche – the old woman of the night. Not all the associations are negative, however, and the notion of the wise owl is something that is often seen.

Tawny Owls were once heavily persecuted by gamekeepers and warreners, the owls regarded as being major predators of Pheasant poults and young Rabbits. Fortunately, such persecution, now illegal, has virtually ceased.

'Old brown owl' retains some of its mystery, thanks to its nocturnal habits, yet it is also a familiar bird, whose wailing calls provide a nocturnal soundscape for these darkening winter evenings.

**Common Name:** Tawny Owl

**Scientific Name:** *Strix aluco*

'strix'=an owl + 'ulucus'=screech owl (Latin)

**Family:** Strigidae

### World distribution:

**BREEDS:** Europe; Asia (east to China and south to Iran)

**WINTERS:** Resident

**Habitat in Britain :** Woodland, shelterbelts & gardens

**Diet:** Small mammals, birds, amphibians, worms and beetles

### Population:

**Breeding:** 19,000 pairs

**Winter:** as breeding

**Conservation Status:** GREEN

**Migratory Status:** Resident

**Average date of first arrival:** Not applicable

### BREEDING ECOLOGY:

**Clutch Size:** 2-3 eggs

**Incubation:** 30 days

**Young in nest:** 35-39 days

**Number of broods:** 1

**Age at first breeding:** 1 year



Tawny Owl chicks by Simon Thurgood

**Typical lifespan:** 4 years

**Maximum recorded lifespan:** 21 years 5 months



### How you can help:

If your garden has suitable woodland cover nearby then why not put up a Tawny Owl nest box? You will need a mature tree onto which to fasten it. See the BTO Nest Box Guide for more information.

Tawny Owl by Sean Gray – [www.grayimages.co.uk](http://www.grayimages.co.uk)

[www.bto.org/birdfacts](http://www.bto.org/birdfacts)