

The Tawny Owl



Recently, around dawn, I have been awoken by the 'kee-wik' call of a Tawny Owl. This isn't surprising at this time of year as these birds are now establishing their territories. Mature owls are defending their traditional territory and this year's young owls are searching to establish their own patch. As a result, a lot of vocalising may be heard.

The Tawny Owl is our most common owl but as it is a nocturnal species, you are more likely to hear it than see it. During the day, they hide away on branches against a tree trunk. The only chance of seeing them in daylight is if they are inadvertently disturbed.

The Tawny Owl has a rounded head and large black eyes which are surrounded by dark feathers. It has reddish-brown upperparts and yellowish-brown underparts. Its wings are short and broad. It has a variety of calls but usually one hears the soft 'hooo...hu...hu...huhuhoo' call of the male or a shrieking 'kee-wik'. It never goes 'tu-whit, tu- whoo' as described in literature.

Tawny Owls may be found in both urban and rural areas. Town owls may be present in churchyards, cemeteries and parks. Rural birds are found in woodland, parkland and large mature gardens which hold a number of trees. They also feed on different prey. Within towns and cities, owls mainly eat birds such as House Sparrows and Starlings which they will snatch while these birds are roosting. Woodland individuals prey more on rodents, shrews, moles and earthworms. They have also been known to take fish and amphibians. An owl will swallow its prey whole and the food enters its crop where the fur, feathers and bones are separated from the digestible parts. The former are then regurgitated as pellets. It is quite easy to find out what its last meal was by examining the bones within the pellets.



Usually, the female Tawny Owl will lay two or three eggs in February or March. The eggs are incubated for about 30 days. The owlets are ready to leave the nest after four weeks but are still dependent on their parents for a further two to three months. When they are learning to fly, sometimes they fall from trees but they are normally able to climb up again, using their strong claws. Life can be very hard for young owls as they gain their independence. Not only do they have to establish their own territory but they also have to fend for themselves by hunting for their own food. It is thought that 2 out of 3 owls die in their first year.

Jean Parrott

Jean is a voluntary Ambassador for the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Garden BirdWatch scheme in Nottinghamshire. If you would like to help the BTO by recording the birds and other wildlife which visit your garden, please contact Jean at jpbirds@talktalk.net