



Ornithology Guernsey
Part of La Société

Guernsey Barn Owl Survey 2020

*Newsletter No 2
June 2020*



Barn Owl hunting near the coast. Photo by Mike Cunningham

COVID-19

It will come as no surprise to hear that the Barn Owl Survey has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. From the end of March throughout the Spring, life has been turned upside-down for all of us.

We had planned to spend time in the spring to visit boxes around the island to check on their state of repair and to see if they were inhabited. With essential travel only being permitted, this was no longer possible. As a result, the survey will now extend through to 2021.

UP-TO-DATE SURVEY INFORMATION

I mentioned in the first newsletter that Vic Froome had very kindly given me all the information about his owl boxes. Most of you receiving this letter will have, or have had, one of his boxes. To get the information up-to-date, the survey has made over 130 phone calls and sent out and more than 160 letters. It has been a mammoth task and 'mopping up' operations are still in hand.

Quite a few boxes have gone, old age and stormy weather over the years have taken their toll. Quite a few have been commandeered by Stock Doves or Wood Pigeons. I was interested to hear from the Barn Owl Trust in Devon that Barn Owls usually win out in the end. I don't think this is necessarily the case over here, but this may be one area that the survey will be able to supply some hard facts.

We have had reports of boxes being occupied by Barn Owls and some being used for breeding. We will have a much clearer idea of numbers by the autumn.

RINGING BARN OWLS

The ringing season has begun. Chris Maurant, Secretary of La Société's Ornithological Section is also a bird ringer. Ringing owlets is a specialised job as nests are usually difficult to access, and not all bird ringers are licensed to ring owls.



Chris with an owlet, June 2020

Ringling recoveries of live and dead birds give important information about distribution, life expectancy and the chances of an owlet surviving into adulthood. At present, we do not have exact data for Barn Owls in Guernsey. The plan is that the survey will develop into an annual monitoring and ringing scheme to match the excellent work being done in Jersey.

Ringling may seem to be at odds with the advice about not disturbing owl boxes at this time of year. Suffice to say that Chris, helped by Vic Froome, has many years of experience. He knows when and how to approach the birds causing minimum disruption.

There will be more on ringling in the next newsletter.

If you have breeding owls or know of a site where they are breeding please help the survey by letting us know and, if they are on your property, agreeing to have the owlets ringed.

You can contact us by email: guernseybarnowlsurvey2020@gmail.com

The Records Centre is being run remotely during lockdown and the phone is not being manned.



A LUCKY ESCAPE



Photo by Liz Hayman

Some of the recent strong winds proved too much for one owl box. The owners were surprised to find that it had fallen down out of the tree. They were even more surprised to discover four Barn Owl chicks inside.

After contacting La Société, they were put in touch with Jamie Hooper and Vic Froome who has done so much to help Barn Owls in the island. They went to the property and were able to ring the four chicks - estimated to be between 2-3 weeks old.

They managed to put the box back up as best they could and trusted that the adults would not be scared away. Barn Owls can live quite happily in busy and noisy places, such as a working farmyard, but they hate the unexpected and can desert eggs and chicks if they are surprised near the nest. Fortunately, the adults are continuing to feed the four chicks.

If you have a Barn Owl box, or think that they may be nesting in a tree cavity or old building on your property, it is best to leave well alone during the spring and summer. Indeed, it is illegal to disturb nest sites when they are active, unless for ringing. Usually, there are signs of activity with whitewash, pellets and sightings of the owls, but this is not always the case. A box that looks unoccupied may be active.

With luck, these chicks will fledge in the summer and disperse later in the autumn, probably not too far from their parents.

HAVE YOU HEARD A BARN OWL?

Once heard, never forgotten, but Barn Owl, also called Screech Owl, calls do not sound like a bird. The two links below take you to Xeno-canto, a website that is a wonderful resource of bird songs and calls from across the world. The first one is the call or screech and the second one is the begging call of owlets. Both have helped it earn a sinister reputation in English folklore - a bird of darkness and death.

Click on the link and then on the play button.

<https://www.xeno-canto.org/546889>

<https://www.xeno-canto.org/186648>

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