



Ornithology Guernsey
Part of La Société

The Guernsey Barn Owl Survey Newsletter 3 February 2022



Photo by Chris Bale

It's hard to believe that it's been over eighteen months since the last newsletter. This is a brief update to let you know what has been going on.



Le Coudré Owls?



In the summer of 2020, a breeding site was found near Le Coudré, with four chicks, two male and two female. Vic Froome recommended installing some more boxes and Guernsey Electricity were happy to help out, supplying poles so the boxes would be well above ground level (at least 12 feet).

Back in the late 1990s, Dot Bramall listed the known breeding and roosting sites of Barn Owls in the island for the Ornithological Section of La Société. Heading the list was 'The Coudré Owl'. Her comment was that the area is 'A traditional Barn Owl roosting and breeding site. Believed to have bred in this site for over one hundred years, (quote Miss Le Messurier).

There is no way of knowing if the area has been used continuously over the past thirty years, but it is great to know that Barn Owls are currently breeding in the area. The chicks were ringed by Chris Maurant in August, 2020.

Boom and Bust Years

In the autumn of 2020, local wildlife photographers were enjoying the spectacle of up to seven Barn Owls hunting the fields at Pleinmont. It looked as though the local population were doing really well.



A hunting Barn Owl at Pleinmont, photo by Mike Cunningham.

Later on in the autumn, the picture changed with dead barn owls being reported. On 26th October 2020, the Guernsey Press carried a report about bad news for the local Barn Owl population. Jamie Hooper, La Société's Land Management and Conservation Officer had found four dead birds and another two were also reported. Normally, around one to two dead birds are found over the course of a year. Although this high death rate may be down to different



factors, the most likely is starvation. Owls predate small mammals: young rats, mice and, most popular, voles which make up nearly half of a Barn Owl's diet.

It is a sad fact that most Barn Owls die from starvation. Young, inexperienced owls are particularly vulnerable when they disperse from their breeding site in the autumn. The entire Barn Owl population is at risk if the voles have a poor breeding year.

Barn Owls do not defend a territory, but have a wide home range where they hunt. If other Barn Owls come into their range, they are not chased off. Possibly the sight of so many Barn Owls hunting over the open areas at Pleinmont was an indication that they were under stress, too many owls hunting too few voles.

Barn Owl populations can fluctuate quite dramatically – boom and bust years – depending on the vole population. They can recover very quickly in a good year, raising broods of four to five chicks and it is quite possible for them to breed more than once.

The concern in Guernsey is loss of rough grassland which is their preferred hunting habitat. One area near Route Militaire was regularly hunted by Barn Owls until recent clearance for new housing.

Surveying Season 2022

Plans to start the fieldwork last year came to nothing as the result of a second lockdown early in the year. It was decided to put the fieldwork on hold.

We are now pressing ahead with the survey this year. We will be putting together a small group of volunteers to monitor known breeding sites and sites where we could reasonably expect Barn Owls to be roosting or breeding.

After watching a feature on Winterwatch about Barn Owls in Northern Ireland, a thermal imaging monocular has been ordered, using part of a donation to La Société Guernesésiaise. As the name suggests, it shows heat sources. It will show if a box is being used or is unoccupied. The hope is that the image will be good enough to show if the occupant is a Barn Owl, Stock dove or something else. Boxes can be checked several times over the coming season, causing minimal disturbance. A box may look unoccupied but can still have breeding owls.



The monocular should be a big time saver for fieldworkers. Other sections have already expressed an interest!

If the thermal image is not detailed enough to identify the species, we can still quickly pinpoint the boxes that are being used and monitor them accordingly. The Barn Owl Trust in Devon are using similar technology and are keen to know how it helps our fieldwork for the coming season.

Ulster Wildlife Trust have also used the services of a spaniel trained to sniff out owl pellets. In a province where they know of thirty breeding pairs, this dog has located ten breeding sites which is very impressive. (Probably one reason why Northern Ireland has so few Barn Owls is the absence of voles in the region.) Again, advice was sought from the Barn Owl Trust, who think this approach is worth investigating. We have a spaniel in mind, we just need a supply of pellets – preferably fresh! If you're able to help with the pellets, we really would like to hear from you. I am happy to come and collect.

We will also be using at least one trail cam to monitor likely nest sites over this coming season. One has already been in use this month on one of our reserves. So far, the owl box has only attracted the attention of a pair of Stock Doves.

As ever, we are keen to hear of any Barn Owl sightings, or if you know of any roosting or breeding sites that might be in use. We are building up a reasonable accurate picture of Barn owls in the island, but all information will help the fieldwork team this year.



And finally...

An interim report is being prepared to give to members of the Ornithology Section at an indoor meeting later in the spring. As you receive this email, you will also receive an invitation to attend.

The year 2020 has been dropped from the name of this survey, apart from the email address which is far too complicated to update. From now on, our name is simply The Guernsey Barn Owl Survey.

Chris Mourant ringed twenty-one Barn Owls in 2020.

The Reserves Committee has ordered two owl boxes to replace a couple of broken ones on our reserves. Grow Ltd will be making them in their sheltered workshop and we are very happy to support this excellent local charity. If you want a replacement owl box or a new one, Vic Froome may accept orders as well as Grow Ltd. He is also very experienced in advising on the best place to site a box. He made the new homes for the Coudré Owls.

If you are already a member of La Société, your subscription is helping us to undertake this important study and other vital work for nature and wildlife in our island. If not, **please consider joining La Société or making a donation.** We work hard to maintain our reserves and other natural habitats in the island. Reserves like the one at Rue de Bergers needs managing and a lot of restoration work is planned for this year. It all costs money!
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