

The 2017 barn owl breeding season in Cambridgeshire - Peter Wilkinson

Barn Owls feed almost exclusively on small mammals, and their breeding success is closely tied to the availability of their prey. Small mammals, especially Field Voles, fluctuate in numbers from year to year and accordingly Barn Owl breeding success tends to be good when numbers are high and poor when numbers are low. For example, over the last few years, after a middling year in 2013, 2014 was their best breeding season in recent memory, only to be followed by an extremely poor season in 2015. 2016 saw a recovery in small mammal numbers and a season second only in recent years to 2014.

It is rare for two good years to follow each other in succession and 2017 proved no exception, with success better than 2015, but not as good as 2016. Many early broods were comparatively small, though some later ones were rather larger, and there were a few second broods for pairs that started their first brood before late April.



Barn Owl breeding is a somewhat protracted affair, with incubation taking a month and the chicks being in the nest for almost two months before fledging. Hunting is difficult, often impossible, in wind and rain and small chicks in particular are vulnerable to periods of bad weather. 2017 saw a number of such periods, which probably contributed to the loss of some chicks and, indeed, sometimes whole broods.

Overall, the Barn Owl is a considerable success story. After a prolonged period of significant decline in the last century, it has been the subject of considerable conservation effort, including both the provision of suitable habitat through the sympathetic management of the grassland on which it and its prey depend, and through the provision of nest boxes, such as those provided in the Middle Level Biodiversity Action Plan. They take readily to appropriate



boxes and it is estimated that some 75-80% of the UK population now nests in man-provided boxes. In good years they are capable of large broods (7 chicks are not uncommon, and even larger broods are occasionally recorded) and also of significant dispersal. Indeed, a chick ringed in Cambridgeshire in 2016 was found, sadly dead, in January 2017 on Holy Island in Northumberland. Such a movement is exceptional but distances up to 100km are not uncommon.

Although there is no official estimate of current Barn Owl numbers, thanks to conservation efforts as above, they have recovered sufficiently for the species to be moved from the Amber List of species of conservation concern to the Green List. Success indeed.