

# NOT TOO LATE FOR THE FARMERS' FRIEND

By **John Lusby**, Raptor Conservation Officer, BirdWatch Ireland.

**D**espite being one of our rarer birds, the barn owl is also one of our best known. Few have witnessed this ghostly form floating silently over their hunting grounds in the dead of night, but perhaps it is this elusiveness and mystery that has given rise to its popularity. Their dark, soul-piercing eyes, bloodcurdling screech and otherworldly appeal have linked them to our folklore, and a unique reverence for barn owls in Ireland remains strong to this day.

Sadly, sightings of this iconic bird have become increasingly rare in many parts of the modern Irish countryside. However, their conservation status provides little cause for optimism; as a Red-listed Bird of Conservation Concern in Ireland, and with recorded breeding range declines of 39 per cent over the past 40 years, their future seems bleak. However the findings of monitoring work through BirdWatch Ireland are providing glimmers of hope, and the goodwill which exists towards the 'farmers' friend' is now being transferred into positive conservation action.

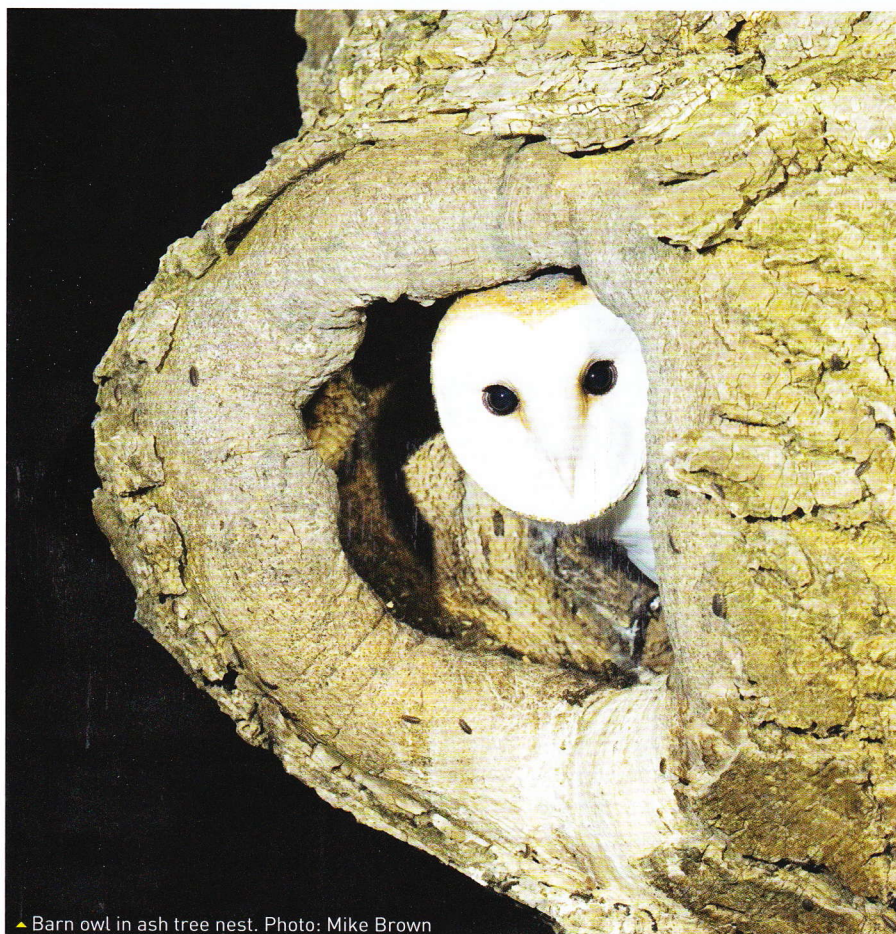
## BARN OWL STATUS

Like many farmland birds in Ireland, the changing agricultural landscape has resulted in dwindling resources available to barn owls. The population reduction is further confirmed by the loss of 69 per cent of barn owl sites monitored between 1995 and 2013. Although rare, barn owls are still widespread and breed in every county. But there is good news – the 2015 season was by far the best on record, which even included the first ever brood of six owlets recorded through the project! BirdWatch Ireland registered 158 sites in 2015, which is the highest recorded. The national population is estimated at approximately 400-500 pairs, however the distribution varies considerably. In 2015, over half of known sites were in Munster, and Kerry in particular appears to be an important source for the national population.

Barn owls will readily take up residence in churches, as well as a range of other ruined buildings of which castles, ruined mansions and derelict farmhouses are the most common. It was previously suspected that the loss or lack of nest sites was a contributing factor to the barn owl decline in Ireland, as has been shown in other countries, however extensive survey work has confirmed a high availability of suitable buildings throughout the Irish countryside.

Barn owl diet varies significantly throughout the country. The bank vole is the main prey item across much of the south-west, the greater white-toothed shrew dominates the diet in Tipperary and parts of Limerick, while the wood mouse is typically the most important element of their diet elsewhere.

The barn owl's diet has consequences due to their risk of exposure to rat poisons. Modern rodenticides, although effective in the necessary control of rats and mice,



▲ Barn owl in ash tree nest. Photo: Mike Brown





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▲ Barn owl hunting. Photo: RSPB images

are extremely toxic and can also affect a range of other wildlife. Barn owls can be exposed to rodenticides by feeding on rodents which previously consumed the poison baits, and recent research revealed that over 85 per cent of Irish barn owls tested had detectable traces of rodenticide compounds in their livers. To reduce the risk of secondary poisoning to barn owls and other rodent predators, the Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use has been established in Ireland to increase awareness of the risks that arise and to promote best practice in rodent control ([www.thinkwildlife.org](http://www.thinkwildlife.org)).

#### **IMPACTS ON BARN OWL POPULATIONS**

Several European studies have linked the increase in major road networks to a decline in barn owl populations. Due to their hunting behaviour, low flight and poor peripheral vision, barn owls are especially vulnerable to collision. From 2006 to 2014, 279 barn owl mortality incidents were recorded in Ireland, of which 64 per cent were vehicle collision victims. In 2016 a research initiative coordinated by Transport Infrastructure Ireland and BirdWatch Ireland will aim to effectively determine the extent and impacts of major roads on barn owls, and if relevant based on the outcomes, develop appropriate mitigation for existing and future road developments. In addition to extensive monitoring, daily road casualty surveys will be carried out on selected sections of motorways and



▲ John Lusby of BirdWatch Ireland carrying out routine monitoring work.

adult birds will be fitted with specialised GPS tags to determine their interactions and potential use of major roads.

In 2015, BirdWatch Ireland's barn owl monitoring and conservation work was supported by Dublin Zoo, The Heritage Council, Galway County

Council, Kerry County Council and Transport Infrastructure Ireland. For further information on barn owls and to download an information booklet visit [www.irishraptors.blogspot.ie](http://www.irishraptors.blogspot.ie). Information on barn owls can be reported to [jlusby@birdwatchireland.ie](mailto:jlusby@birdwatchireland.ie). 🐾