



# Thorndon Birdlife

## May 2023

I checked my garden Barn owl box this week for signs of breeding activity and was completely surprised to find a Tawny owl (*Strix aluco*) on a nest incubating three eggs.

This is a species that favours woodland habitats, but it may also breed in larger rural and suburban gardens. It is known as the 'hooting hunter with silent wings' without a sound, the tawny owl descends from its lofty perch to snatch unsuspecting rodents from the forest floor below. This species requires suitable tree cavities or nest boxes for breeding and so may be limited by their availability. Dispersal of young birds is restricted, with most individuals only moving a few kilometres, and there appears to be a reluctance to cross large waterbodies. This may explain the absence of the species from many offshore islands and indeed from Ireland.

Our most familiar owl, the Tawny owl is found across the UK but is absent from Ireland. Open landscapes and open upland areas are also avoided. The hooting calls of this species can be heard from late autumn and through the winter months, underlining that this is a species that breeds early in the year. The territorial hooting call of a male is probably the most known of the owl calls, beginning with a drawn out 'hooo', followed by a brief pause, before softer 'hu' and then a resonant final phrase of 'huhuhuhooo' This final phrase has a strong vibrato quality to it. The female usual call is 'keewik', which is used as a contact call. A resident pair will often duet.



**Tawny owl adult**



**Tawny owl chicks**

**The Tawny owl** is non-migratory and highly territorial: as a result, when young birds grow up and leave the parental nest, if they cannot find a vacant territory to claim as their own, they will often starve.

It is a nocturnal bird of prey. It is able to hunt successfully at night because of its vision and hearing adaptations and its ability to fly silently. It hunts mainly rodents, although in urbanised areas its diet includes a higher proportion of birds. It also sometimes catches smaller owls, and in Europe is itself sometimes hunted by the Eagle owl and the Northern goshawk.

**The tawny owl holds a place in human folklore** because it is active at night and has what many humans experience as a haunting call, people have traditionally associated it with bad omens and death. Many people think that all owl species make a hooting sound, but that is a distortion based on the call of this particular species. In addition, the double hoot, which many people think is the tawny owl's prototypical call, is actually a call and response between a male and a female.

Brown in colouration, with a rounded head and dark forward-facing eyes, the Tawny owl is typically owl-like in its appearance. Three different colour forms occur across the European breeding range, with the chestnut brown form most commonly encountered within the UK. The facial disk is rather plain in colour and pattern and within this sit the dark eyes and horn-coloured bill. The upperparts are rich chestnut brown, with areas of both lighter and darker tones that help to camouflage the bird when perched within its favoured woodland habitat. Males and females are similar in appearance but differ in size, though with a degree of overlap, females are larger of the two sexes, 5% longer and more than 25% heavier.

This species is fearless in defence of its nest and young, and, like other *Strix* owls, strikes for the intruder's head with its sharp talons. Because its flight is silent, it may not be detected until it is too late to avoid the danger. Dogs, cats and humans may be assaulted, sometimes without provocation. Perhaps the best-known victim of the tawny owl's fierce attack was the **renowned bird photographer Eric Hosking**, who lost his left eye when struck by a bird he was attempting to photograph near its nest in 1937. He later called his autobiography *An Eye for a Bird*.

**Garden sightings:** Blackbirds, Common Buzzard x 4, Mistle Thrush, Green woodpecker, Red Kite x 2, Tawny owl, Chiffchaff calling. Blackcap x 3 Yellow Hammer heard

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