

STOUR VALLEY BARN-OWL NEWS SEPTEMBER 2009



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2009 has proved to be an extremely challenging one for the Barn-owl within the Stour Valley and through-out Essex and Suffolk.

The small mammals, especially the Field-vole (which tends to exhibit cyclical breeding success), which form the staple diet of our Barn-owls, have been in very short supply this year.

A fairly harsh winter 08/09 and a wet spring, with extensive flooding, virtually wiped out the population of small mammals on the flood-plain and this has been reflected in a poor breeding season for *Tyto alba*.

The onset of breeding was delayed as the female needs to get up to a critical weight and condition before she will lay fertile eggs. Clutch sizes were low, followed by a poor hatch rate. The survival of the few chicks that did hatch was also compromised, with few spare prey items seen lying in the boxes with many young chicks starving. One clutch of 3 near Bures failed completely, despite what appeared to be a good early start. (Photo below).



All these factors, followed by a very dry late-summer, conspired to result in only 14 fledglings being ringed from the 70 boxes within the project. It is notable that these were concentrated at sites where there are extensive areas of suitable rough grassland habitat.

One successful site on the Upper Stour below Kedington produced 4 fat, healthy chicks from two boxes, only 400 yards apart, over-looking more than 70 acres of prime habitat.

A custom-built 'Owl-tower', near Assington, produced two chicks in its first year, much to the delight of its owners.

After over-hearing a snippet of local gossip, followed up by some stealthy detective work, involving tapping on many tree trunks and listening for that characteristic hiss, a new natural nest-site was located in a large cavity, in an old Ash tree, near Foxearth. David Wilkin managed to extract and ring two youngsters.

Our two most productive boxes were one on a massive ancient Oak at Lower Layham, with 3 young and a pole-box near Alphamstone, where, after a wait of several years, 3 fine fledglings were finally produced. (photo below) .



I must thank everyone involved in the Barn Owl work within the valley this year for making me so welcome. The land-owners , game-keepers, woodmen, licensed ringers, Suffolk Community Barn Owl Project staff and my trusty band of volunteers who helped me find all the boxes, opened the gates, held the ladders, took the notes and bagged up pellets for later analysis, helped to make my first season in this fascinating job a lot easier . More than anything they helped increase the Barn Owls' chances of breeding in this difficult year and all deserve a well-earned pat on the back for their efforts.

It must also be said that we owe the past success of the Barn owl project in this beautiful valley to the sterling efforts and determination of my predecessor Peter Ennis and to David Wilkin, who has provided much needed support and advice this year.

Peter and his family are apparently settling in well in their new life in New Zealand ; he was thrilled to find that the children could go to school in bare feet and photos of them all canoeing on the vast lakes have filtered back to us . I am sure we all wish them the best of luck in their new venture.

Looking forward to next year, we must hope for a mild winter and all make an effort, wherever possible, to increase the areas of rough grass-land. Keep those mowers locked away in the shed for the odd season, or at least set at a minimum of 4 inches in order to encourage the proliferation of the tussock-forming grasses which provide the essential cover and breeding sites for the small mammals on which our Barn-owls are so dependent.

I hope to be able to visit most of the boxes during November and December, if time permits, in order to carry out running repairs, check the fixing bolts, which must periodically be released slightly, as the tree grows around them, and also to remove old Stock Dove / Jackdaw nests and Squirrel dreys. The level of accumulated pellets in the regularly used boxes needs to be reduced to a maximum of 2 inches to enable sufficient access for removal of chicks or adults when needed.

If I can be of help in any other way, then please contact me either at the office number above or on my mobile number, which is :- 07989 521 084.

Neil.C.Catchpole, Landscape and Biodiversity Officer. Sept. 2009.

