

Tawny owl

Strix aluco



Description

The tawny owl is our largest common owl, with a rounded body and head, and a hooked beak. They are chestnut brown, and have large dark forward-facing eyes, and dark feathers creating a ring around its face. The mottled patterning help camouflage the bird when perched high up in woodland. They stand up to 39cm tall and have a wingspan of up to 1m. Males and females are very similar in appearance but the females are the larger of the two sexes.

Tawny owls primarily live in deciduous broad-leaved woodlands, but can also be found in farmland, hedgerows and forestry. They will also inhabit more urban areas including parkland if there are plenty of mature trees. They nest in tree cavities, squirrel drays or old nests made by other bird species, or will also use purpose built nestboxes.

What they eat

Tawny owls feed mostly on small mammals (such as mice and voles), small birds, amphibians and large insects and earthworms.

Where and when to see them

- They can be seen all year round.
- Tawny owls are nocturnal...you will have stay up late to spot them.
- Don't forget to listen out too - tawny owls hoot.
- Look carefully at night - they can look quite pale in car headlights.

Legal status

Barn owls are protected by law under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, and have been given a UK conservation status of Amber.

Field signs to look for

As with many species, it is not always easy to see owls. However, they often leave signs that reveal they have been present.

Pellets

A pellet containing the undigested parts of prey items (e.g. bones, teeth, fur) is regurgitated (i.e. coughed up through the beak) and discarded; they are often found in or under a roost/perch site.

The pellets of tawny owls measure around 20-50mm long and are usually greyer and more obviously furry than those of the barn owl. They are usually a bumpy, irregular shape and are often less solid than other owls' pellets and can break into pieces when they hit the ground.

Droppings

Tawny owl droppings are usually white. Look underneath potential perch or roost sites.

Feathers

Tawny owl feathers are gingery-brown with dark bands. However, they can look like the feathers of other birds so check along the edges for serrations (like a comb) which allow them to fly silently (like other owls).

Calls

The hooting call of a male tawny owl is one of most familiar of any bird calls. It is a drawn out 'hooo' followed by a softer 'hu', and then a repetitive 'hoohooohooooo'. The female's call is a 'keewick'. A pair will often duet with the male and female taking turns to call and making the classic call of 'twit twoo'. Hooting most often occurs at night, although some calling can be heard in daylight.

Did you know?

Tawny owls do not occur in Ireland, and the collective noun for a group of owls is a parliament!

Links

RSPB

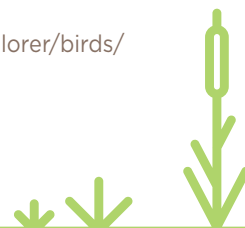
<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/tawny-owl/>

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)

<https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/project-owl/learn-about-owls/tawny-owl>

The Wildlife Trusts

<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-explorer/birds/birds-prey/tawny-owl>



Similar Species

The table below illustrates how the tawny owl compares to two other commonly seen owls.

Tawny owl (<i>Strix aluco</i>)	Barn owl (<i>Tyto alba</i>)	Short-eared owl (<i>Asio flammeus</i>)
Stout and bulky bird. About 430mm tall with a wing span of 950mm.	Elegant looking bird. About 330mm tall with a wingspan of 900mm.	Slender and streamlined bird. About 350mm tall with a wing span of 1000m.
Mottled brown-grey underparts.	White underparts.	Pale brown underparts, with brown streaks.
Mottled brown-grey upperparts.	Golden, buff-coloured upperparts with blue-grey markings.	Pale and dark brown upper parts.
Round face with large brown-black eyes. No ear tufts.	Heart shaped face with small dark eyes. No ear tufts.	Round face with yellow eyes, and short ear-tufts.
Primarily lives in woodland, and nests in holes in trees. Tawny owls will also use old magpie nests, squirrel dreys, and nestboxes.	Lives mainly in open farmland, and nests in hollow trees and rock crevices. Barn owl will also nest in barns, churches and other old buildings. They will also use nestboxes.	Lives in farmland, heathland, moorland and wetland habitats such as marshes. They nest on the ground in scraped-out hollows.
Largely nocturnal. More likely to hear it than see it.	Often seen hunting at dusk and dawn.	Can often be seen hunting in both daytime and during night.
A 'Toowit twoo' call (actually the females call 'kewick' and males respond with a 'hoohoo').	Rarely call, and they don't hoot, they shriek and hiss.	Rarely call, but males 'boo-boo-boo-boo-boo' whilst females give a 'ree-yow' call.
Mainly eat small mammals and birds.	Mainly eat small mammals	Mainly eat small mammals and birds.

