



Barn Owl / Caillagh Oie

Tyto alba

Biodiversity Action Plan | Cummey Yannoo Beiyen-Feie



Background

The Barn Owl *Tyto alba* (Manx: *Caillagh Oie*) is a Wildlife Act 1990 **Schedule 1** specially protected species which is on the *Birds of Conservation Concern in the Isle of Man 2021* (BoCCIoM) **Red List** due to a decline in both breeding population and breeding range. The low number of records that have been received in the recent years, suggests a that the population is struggling, likely from a combination of lack of suitable prey (and habitat) along with rife secondary poisoning from rodenticides.

Description

The Barn Owl's endearing appearance, its occasional daylight hunting and breeding in close proximity to humans has made this species one of the region's most popular birds. This species has a distinctively heart-shaped face, buff wings and a mostly white body. It is most often seen when hunting in silent flight, low over rough grassy vegetation, but it may also be seen perched on fence posts or in car headlights at night. Barn Owl breeding success can fluctuate significantly in response to prey abundance; in 'good' small mammal years, large broods of chicks can be raised, but when small mammal populations are low perhaps only one or two chicks may be reared. British and Irish Barn Owls are sedentary throughout the year, with movements largely limited to the chick dispersal period. Secondary poisoning, collision with road traffic and winter starvation are frequently recorded cause of deaths.

Females larger than males. Weight typically 250–570 grams. Body length typically 32–40 cm. Wingspan typically 80–110 cm.



Manx Barn Owl chicks being ringed on an Area of Special Scientific Interest in June 2023 to better understand their local numbers, distribution and survivability © Manx Wildlife Trust

British & Ireland Distribution

The species is widespread across Britain & Ireland but absent from the far north and west of Scotland, most upland areas and most urban centres (BTO).

Isle of Man Distribution & Population

The BoCCIoM 2021 estimate is of only 10 breeding pairs, with some 40 individual birds during winter (which includes young of that year). The breeding population is largely confined to the **agriculturally** dominated Northern Plain, however lone birds are annually reported from other lowland farmed areas including the parishes of German, Patrick, Marown, Santon, Malew, Arbory and Rushen.

In the 1980s, Barn Owls were brought from the UK and released on the Isle of Man in hope to increase their numbers, but this has now been prohibition (without licence) by the passage of the Wildlife Act 1990.

Manx BirdLife have observed a **historical decline in their breeding population**, believing that the species has undergone a severe decline, but has somewhat recovered or shows early signs of recovery (BoCCIoM).

On the Island, the species has undergone:

- A short-term **population** decline (1998-2003 to 2006-16) of **-50%** (a criteria for red-listing);
- A short-term decline of breeding **range** (1998-2003 to 2006-16) of **-61.1%** (a criteria for red-listing);
- A longer-term decline of breeding **range** (1977-81 to 2006-16) of **-12.5%**.

In addition, the Manx population is highly vulnerable as it has a:

- Localised breeding **population** (being found in only **0.3%** of the Island's 1km squares (a criteria for amber-listing).
- Localised wintering **population** (being found in only 7.0% of the Island's 1km squares).

The Island supports 0.3% of the combined UK and IOM breeding population of this species, on just 0.18% of the combined area.

Habitat and Ecology

- Monogamous, although reports of polygyny exist. Mate for life.
- Breed once (occasionally twice) per year, can breed any time of year depending on food supply.
- Sexual maturity reached at one year of age.
- Typical lifespan: 4 years. Max age (from ringing): 15 years, 3 months.
- Tend to reuse existing nests rather than build new ones.
- Readily take to artificial nest boxes and sites.
- Will roost and nest in hollow veteran trees and/or historic buildings/ruins which retain a roof and sufficient shelter.
- Nest lined with shredded pellets. Typically, 4-6 eggs laid at a rate of 1 egg every 2-3 days. Female incubates eggs for 29-34 days.
- Chicks are 'altricial' (require feeding upon hatching) and are fed by the female for 25 days after hatching.
- First flight is 50-70 days after hatching, becoming independent from parents (and leaving nest) 3-5 weeks later.
- Nocturnal (often crepuscular in Britain). Active in day during/after prolonged periods of bad weather / lack of food.
- Hunts rodents (shrews, mice, longtails) using sound. Kills prey with talons. Swallows prey whole. Regurgitates fur and bone as pellets.
- Typically eat 3-4 prey items/night (same for each owlet and adults). Unable to hunt in bad weather conditions (rain, strong wind) as their feathers are not waterproof (the feathers adapted for silent flight, with no use of the uropygial gland to spread oil over plumage).
- Requires large areas of rough grassland and/or prey-rich arable land for foraging.

Legal protection

Section 1 and Schedule 1 (special protection) of the Wildlife Act 1990.

Threats

- Secondary poisoning from chronic and widespread use of anticoagulant rodenticides (laboratory necropsy analysis by DEFA has shown Manx Barn Owls to have some of the highest recorded levels of rodenticides in their bodies in a UK context).
- Lack of sheltered and undisturbed roosting and breeding sites in old barns, ruins and veteran tree cavities along with barns being converted into residential properties and abandonment & collapse of vernacular farm buildings.
- Vehicle strike on roads without high hedges/boundary features.
- Lack of available prey items, notably a natural absence of voles (their favoured prey item) on the Isle of Man.
- On arable land: a lack of prey due to more intensive agricultural management and an ongoing reduction in arable farming, including:
 - a high prevalence of herbicide use resulting in a lack of weed seeds which support rodents and birds;
 - a lack of spilt grain from efficient modern machinery, suppressing rodent numbers;
 - reduction in winter stubbles in favour of winter sowing of the next crop or reseeded with grass;
 - very short (or no) arable field margins;
 - lack of 'set-aside' management locally;
 - general reduction in arable area in favour of more widespread specialisation into pasture.
- On pastoral land: a lack of prey due to:
 - lack of extensive areas of rough/rank grassland that has been in situ and ungrazed/cut for 2 years+;
 - a huge reduction in the area of traditional (wildflower) hay meadow management since the 1940s.
- Increasing occurrence of prolonged periods of very wet, windy and chilly weather, which affect their ability to hunt and can lead to starvation. Reducing threat on prolonged heavy snow, hard frosts or cold spells.
- Lack of suitable financial support (and resulting low uptake) for 'conservation headlands' on the Island.
- Human disturbance (dog walkers, bird watchers, wildlife photographers) at key feeding sites.

Reason for BAP

The species **faces a risk of local extirpation**: without conservation action, it is assessed that the ongoing decline of this species may in the long term become terminal.

Aims

Ensure the ongoing survival of this species on the Isle of Man until such time as long-term widespread and effective agri-environment initiatives, and a wholesale reduction in rodenticide use allow for a more resilient, self-sustaining Barn Owl population.

To create awareness amongst the Manx farmers and the Manx public about what the Barn Owl needs to survive and thrive on the Isle of Man.

Linked BAPS

Tree Sparrow – *Jallyn ny Miljyn* which is also heavily reliant on arable agriculture and sensitive farming practices.

Delivery Options	Active	Challenges
○ Ensure that DEFA, Manx BirdLife (MBL), Manx Ornithological Society (MOS), Manx Wildlife Trust (MWT), Curragh's Wildlife Park (CWP) and the farming community are working in unison to encourage this species survival by supporting this BAP as one of the MWT-housed 'Action for Wildlife' projects, noting that the DEFA Agri-Environment Scheme is the long-term solution to the conservation of this species.	Yes	Resources, AES uptake, AES payment rates
○ Gain a more thorough understanding of the Barn Owl population by reviewing historic records from 1940 – present and uploading them to the Recorder6 database.	No	Requires volunteers to analyse the data
○ Secure funding to upskill and fully qualify and licence the Farmland Birds Officer to deliver this BAP along with the necessary materials and consumables.	Yes	Resources
○ Work with the MWT Agri-Environment Officer and DEFA to create or adapt Barn Owl initiatives through the AES grant scheme.	No	Resources
○ Obtain a Barn Owl taxidermy for public engagement.	Yes	Nil

o Produce an advice note for all Manx farmers and provide individual, bespoke in-field Barn Owl advice to farmers, landowners and managers.	Yes	Resources
o Provide internal and external Barn Owl boxes for farm buildings, nature reserves and suitable farmland.	Yes	Resources
o Public presentations on 'the Owls of the Isle of Man'.	Yes	Resources
o Barn Owl-specific rough grassland management trial and monitoring project, including placement of hunting perches.	No	Resources
o Provide safe supplementary feeding sites on farmland.	Yes	Resources
o Use a remote camera at a Barn Owl feeding station to monitor use, for engagement and to detect leg rings.	No	Resources
o Barn Owl ringing for study, conservation & engagement purposes.	Yes	Resources
o Liaise with BTO re-potential to use colour rings on Barn Owls.	No	Resources
o Deliver an online Barn Owl Trust talk for Manx farmers.	No	Resources
o Host an on-farm Barn Owl Walk for Manx farmers.	No	Resources
o Barn Owl necropsy liver analysis for Second Generation Anticoagulant Rodenticide (SGAR).	No	Resources
o Education campaign to farmers and the wider public on Second Generation Anticoagulant Rodenticide (SGAR) secondary poisoning.	No	Resources
o Purchase Barn Owl dissection packs for education purposes.	No	Resources
o Produce a 1hr session for primary, secondary schools & youth clubs.	No	Resources
o Biennial review and update of this document	MWT	Due Oct 2027
Delivery Strategy		Lead
Deliver a Barn Owl conservation project via upskilling, adequate resourcing and collaboration with Manx farmers, landowners and land managers to increase the Manx Barn Owl population.		Farmland Birds Recovery Officer
Work closely with the above Barn Owl project to create awareness to the general public via the Barn Owl collection within the Wildlife Park with relevant engagement events and information boards. Provide baseline funding opportunities.		Curraghs Wildlife Park

References:

- Sharp, C. (Ed.) (2007), *Manx Bird Atlas: An Atlas of Breeding and Wintering Birds on the Isle of Man*. Liverpool University Press.
- Morris, N.G. & Sharpe C. (2021), *Birds of Conservation Concern in the Isle of Man 2021*. Manx BirdLife.
- BTO (2023), *BirdFacts: profiles of birds occurring in the United Kingdom*. BTO, Thetford (<https://www.bto.org/birdfacts>, accessed on 12/09/2025).