

Owls

A correspondent who visits the area frequently has questioned why I have never written about owls. I answered that I did not have much owl “experience” but I have now rethought that statement and realized that there are a few interesting things I can recount!

When we first moved here in 2003 and in the 10 years or so afterwards we used to see Barn Owls occasionally in the marshy valley behind the house (Winterton Marsh). We worked out that they were nesting in a small barn, visible from a gate. The exit from the barn was through a small narrow window at the end which was tricky to see from my viewpoint leaning on the gate, but persistence used to pay off. The owls would not emerge until it was very nearly too dark to see, but then they would often leave the window and sit on the roof before flying off to hunt. I watched them for a number of years during the breeding season when there were definitely two owls present and presumably they were feeding chicks. Sometimes you could hear the chicks making a loud hissing noise, described on the web as a “raspy snoring food call”. The adults occasionally gave their eery call described as “a drawn-out gargling scream” but I did not hear it often. In 2011 one of the owls would sometimes hunt by day and this picture was taken of the owl sitting on our fence. Later that year in October we had a chance to investigate the small barn with the owner and his friend Mike Crutchley, who is a photographer. There was an owl box inside, and even after the breeding season there were two owls present – this a picture of one of them, who was sitting inside the owl box. However, after this period we saw the owls less frequently and apart from 2018 I do not believe they bred in that little barn during the last 10 years. The habitat does not seem to have changed much – still plenty of voles - maybe the small barn, whose roof is collapsing, is no longer suitable.



But over that latter period we have seen and, in particular, heard Tawny Owls especially in the early winter when youngsters are looking for new territories. I do not believe they breed close to our house – there is not really enough mature woodland – but they definitely breed in Dale, where both the adult calls and the wheezing of youngsters can be heard in the spring and summer. The correspondent mentioned above has sent me a lovely recording of two (or more) Tawny Owls calling up at St Brides Castle at the Winter Solstice in 2022. So they are definitely breeding there. (As in Dale, it’s good when there is more than one pair as they call to one another to defend their territories, which a single pair may not do). We do sometimes see Tawny Owls hanging around our house trying to catch bats – it soon gets too dark to see what is happening but I expect they get a few. Alas I have no pictures of a local Tawny Owl.

Lastly a short note on Short-eared Owls. These beautiful day-flying owls breed on Skomer and sometimes Skokholm, and can often be seen in the evening at Dowrog Common. They are birds of open country - I have seen one quartering the marsh below the house. They are beautifully marked and always remind me of a large moth with their floating flight.

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