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Working for wild Birds of Prey and their Habitats

Press Release

Somerset Barn Owl Project

Background on the collapse in barn owl numbers over the last couple of years by Chris Sperring, our Conservation Officer for the South West.

The continual rains of 2012 continued for a while into the winter but a sense of a drier time ahead soon became apparent at the beginning of 2013. To begin with the dry periods led to frosts and some snow, but nothing drastic and barn owls generally fared well. Yet this winter was to end with a devastating sting in its tail, and one that would continue right into spring. The Northeasterly wind blew through late February into March and April. It was bitterly cold, with prolonged snow cover in many places.

The grass was not growing, so the field voles (the barn owls main food prey) were not breeding. Unlike 2012, there was no early spring surge of field vole numbers, and in early 2013 barn owls were struggling just to survive; hunting day and night just to sustain themselves; using so much energy there was no chance of them coming into breeding condition.

We began monitoring known nest sites towards the end of April to see whether some of the faithful nests, which have been successful for at least 20 years, were on course this year. Of the 10 sites I looked at only four had barn owls present, and two of those only had just a single bird.

Meanwhile, earlier in the year the Somerset Wildlife Trust had set up a webcam in a nest box which had successfully fledged five owlets in 2012, in the hope that visitors to their website could follow the progress of the barn owl family this year. A male barn owl roosted in the box until the end of March, then like so many others around this time he failed to return. This was a pattern that repeated itself in nest



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box after nest box I visited during late May and June. I could clearly find evidence of barn owl usage, but all signs stopped around March or the beginning of April. Where pairs were still present there were no signs of breeding.

In August 2013, and I was still checking barn owl nests, which I have normally finished doing by then. I returned from an 800 acre arable farm which has fantastic, wide grassy margins around the fields, paid for through the Higher Level Stewardship scheme. The farmer has eight barn owl boxes of which six have been successful nest sites in recent years.

The margins on this farm are superb and are normally teaming with voles but not this year - in the boxes we found no owlets at all. Of the eight boxes checked, three had barn owls in them. The positive side was that one of the pairs had a clutch of 6 eggs – four months late, but a good sign non-the-less, and a good sized clutch too.

I am continuing to monitor nest sites and boxes, but out of 83 nest sites and boxes that I have checked so far this year, 46 contained evidence that barn owls had been present within the past six months, but only 27 still have barn owls present, and only five contain active nests (with a total of eight live chicks and 6 eggs between them).

Of 42 regular breeding sites, 16 still have two adults present, and as barn owls have the ability to breed at almost any time of the year, I am hopeful that aside from the five pairs already breeding, the 11 others will still have time, but even if they do breed we are looking at a potential reduction in breeding pairs in Somerset of around 75%.

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