

TAWNY OWL

The Tawny owl is a secretive bird, hiding by day in dense foliage, or pressed against a tree trunk, its mottled plumage blending with the texture of the bark.

It is a creature of the night, a mysterious nocturnal predator. It has large forward facing eyes, giving it binocular vision. The eyes are permanently fixed in their sockets and cannot be moved independently. Specially adapted bones and blood vessels in the neck allows the owl to swivel its head to look behind without moving its body. Contrary to popular belief, tawny owls cannot see in total darkness, but are more reliant on hearing than on eyesight to catch prey. Their ears are asymmetrical, allowing them to accurately pin-point rustling sounds from the woodland floor by tilting their head from side to side. Tawny owls prey on small rodents, mainly wood mice and bank voles. Their hunting technique is one of patience, as the owl sits, waits and listens.

It is an early nester with eggs laid during March. The two or three eggs are laid in succession of two to five day intervals. Incubation begins with the first egg, resulting in asynchronous hatching. Tawny owls cannot hunt in pouring rain, as unlike most other birds their feathers are not oiled, an adaption which allows them to fly silently. Therefore in persistent wet conditions, larger chicks can eat smaller siblings in order to survive.

The chicks have a much longer dependency on adults than most other British birds. After 29 days of incubation, the young are in the nest for 34-35 days. As the owlets grow, so does the sound they make in their incessant demand to be fed. The typical persistent call of a nestling tawny owl sounds like 'ptsssss-ptsssss'. Tawny owlets depart the nest before they can fly. Two or three noisy fledglings scattered around in bushes, have better prospects of survival than remaining together in the nest.

Tawny owls mate for life. The characteristic 'h-hooooo-hoo' call is territorial and given mostly by the male. It is an eerie, mournful cry, fading to a melancholy minor tone. The high-pitched 'ke-wick' is most often given by the female in response. It is only after the retiring 'plink-plink-plink' of the last blackbird to settle down at dusk, that the owl stirs from its secret hiding place.

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