

The life cycle of a barn owl



Photograph by Joel Bauchet - Barn Owl Trust

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1

Breeding

Barn owls pair up together in the late winter.

They spend a lot of time together.

They are affectionate to each other, preening and rubbing cheeks!

The male gathers food for his mate as she builds a nest.

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Nesting

Barn owl mothers lay their eggs in spring.

The male continues to hunt for food and protects the nest.

The mother owl will start incubating the eggs from the time the first one is laid.

More eggs are laid over the next few days.



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Hatching

The average number of eggs laid by barn owls is between five and six.

The eggs usually hatch in the order they were laid.

The mother will brood the hatchlings until the oldest is three weeks old.



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Little owlets



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After about five weeks the owlets have their characteristic heart-shaped face.

Their white feathers are soft and fluffy.

When they are hungry they call endlessly for food.

Growing up

The owlets are very active and will 'play' in the nest like kittens.

From three weeks old they are increasingly mobile and by five weeks they run, jump, pounce, hiss, click their tongues, and move their heads in the most comical manner from side to side, round and round, even turning their heads upside down!



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Learning to fly



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Little owls will come to the edge of the nest to wait for food.

By nine weeks they have already made their first flights and by ten weeks they can fly quite well.

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Learning to hunt

Once they are outside, the little owlets' 'play-hunting' continues: pouncing on anything that moves, especially leaves and each other.

The earliest recorded prey capture was at 72 days old and by the owlets' 12th week they are getting much less food from the adults.



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Leaving the nest

Owlets normally start to leave the nest at 11-12 weeks old and by 14 weeks almost all owlets have left their parents' home range.

There is some evidence that baby owls who try to stay are chased away by the adults (particularly by the female) but records also exist of young being allowed to stay in the nest for several months.

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Adult owls

Now that the owls are grown up they can start their own families and the life cycle can start again.



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10

Life cycle summary

Courtship (breeding) - can start in February but is mainly in March.

Egg laying - first half of April.

Incubation (sitting on the eggs) - second half of April and first half of May.

Hatching - second half of May.

Young growing in nest - June and first half of July.

Fledging (flying) - second half of July.

Young keep returning to the nest - first half of August.

Dispersal (leaving home) - second half of August to end of November.

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Barn owl Q & A

1. When do barn owls lay their eggs? **Spring**
2. What is the average number of eggs laid by barn owls? **Between five and six**
3. What kind of things can barn owls do by five weeks old? Name three. **Run, jump, pounce, hiss, click tongues, move heads**
4. How old are the owls when they make their first flight? **Nine weeks**
5. When do owlets leave their nest? **11-12 weeks**

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12