

The Owls of Turvey

Five of the six resident British owls have occurred locally in the last ten years and one escapee. Of these, two are relatively common and particularly vocal at the moment. These are the Tawny Owl and the Little Owl. The Tawny is rarely seen, being strictly nocturnal and a denizen of woodland, while the Little Owl is more conspicuous as it favours more open country and is readily disturbed from hedgerow trees. It has a distinct up and down flight as it retreats from tree to tree. It also has a distinct pattern of white spots and vivid yellow eyes if seen close to. The Tawny Owl, in contrast, is much larger and darker with a prominent head and black eyes. This is the owl with the famous 'towit towoo' call which is actually a conflation of two calls: a shrill 'kewick' and a long drawn out 'hoouuh - ho, ho' ho' hoouuh'. It is particularly vocal now as resident birds are seeing-off any youngsters trying to establish a territory for themselves. Since Tawny Owls are resident for life and relatively long-lived, - five years plus being the norm, - this bodes ill for most of the youngsters, some sixty percent eventually succumbing to starvation.

Of the remaining species the Barn Owl was once very common but has declined dramatically in recent decades. One or two pairs are still resident locally and can be seen hunting along roadsides and over pasture an hour or so before nightfall. This is the bird whose pale ghostly form and shrieking call can send shivers down the spine, especially if encountered in one of

its traditional haunts - the village graveyard. Seen close to, it has a wonderfully bespeckled and an incredibly silent almost floating flight. Two other species can occasionally be encountered. Of these, the Long-eared Owl has bred nearby on at least one occasion. Its song is a very gentle series of deep hoots which leaves one wondering whether one has heard it or not. But its appearance when alarmed is unmistakable - with raised ear tufts and orange eyes. The Short-eared Owl, in contrast, has yellow eyes, less prominent tufts and paler plumage generally. I've seen one on three occasions locally, once at Harrod Country Park in the autumn, and twice in a field allowed to run wild when up to three were present with a kestrel and a fox, all busily hunting voles.

Last, but by no means least, was an Eagle Owl which may have escaped from an aviary near Oundle some years ago. Fortunately for the local game birds, and for the matter other owls, which I has been known to kill and eat, it wasn't around for long.

Br. John.

