

Belize Bird Rescue
Barn Owls in Belize

Meet the Barn Owl

There are more than 30 different species of barn owl in the world covering every continent except Antarctica. The Latin name *Tyto alba alba* means 'white owl'. They are also known as Monkey-faced Owl, Ghost Owl, Death Owl and Night Owl. They have a bad image in Belize and are known locally as 'devil birds'. Barn Owl myths have been handed down through the generations from as far back as the Ancient Maya: the Maya god of the dead, Mictlantecuhtli, was often depicted with a barn owl. Many Mesoamerican cultures consider them a symbol of death and destruction and locals say if one passes over your house, someone will die and if a pregnant woman sees one, she will abort. Of course, none of this is true, but as a result of such myths, many birds are killed or injured by fearful humans.



Where do they live?

Barn owls in Belize like to live and hunt in lowland areas of farmlands, pine savannah, towns and cities. More naturally they would nest in tree hollows and rock crevices but have adapted beautifully to man-made outbuildings and roof-spaces. Belize City has a very healthy barn owl population, thanks to the abundant food supply and attractive roof spaces in which to nest .



What do they eat?

Urban owls thrive on rats and mice, but a rural barn owl will also take birds, fish, reptiles and insects. They hunt at night, and although they have very good eyesight, they rely mostly on sound to locate prey. They perch and swoop down onto the prey once they hear or see something moving, or they fly within 10 feet of the ground and dive onto their prey with their talons extended. They have completely silent flight which adds to their eerie reputation and makes them very

effective hunters. Prey is often swallowed whole and indigestible parts such as bones, teeth, feathers and fur are then regurgitated in the form of a 2-inch long pellet which is produced twice a day. The contents of these pellets litter the floor of a barn owl roost: some roof spaces are 6-8 inches deep in rat bones. The owl uses this gruesome debris as a cushion for her eggs.

An adult barn owl in Belize City will eat 2-4 rats in a single a night and an owl family can demolish 10 or 12 a night. This works out to about 3000 rodents per year eaten by just one family. Imagine the state of our cities if barn owls weren't busy keeping down the rat populations.

How do they hunt?

Barn owls, like all raptors (birds that hunt in flight) have strong grasping talons for killing prey, and a hooked upper beak for tearing meat. Their legs and talons are extremely long, which enables them to reach deep into vegetation to grasp their prey. An owl can hunt in total darkness with their excellent eyesight, but more often they use their hearing to locate prey, locating a mouse peep or leaf rustle from many feet away. The ears are positioned at about eye level, just behind the ridge of facial feathers. One ear is higher than the other allowing him to simultaneously locate sound from above and below, and from the side.



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What about reproduction?

Barn owls mate for life. They are sexually mature around 10-12 months of age and, because they have a short lifespan in the wild (approximately 2 years) they breed only once or twice in their lives, often using the same nest site. They are not very territorial and it's common in Belize City to see more than one pair using the same roof space. They don't build a nest like most other birds, but they lay their eggs on a flat surface in a dark space and surround them with their pellets.

The males usually have whiter breasts with fewer and smaller dark specks, whereas females are generally heavier and have more and larger dark specks.



The female lays 3-11 eggs (average 4-6) every 2-3 days. She incubates them for 30-34 days, starting when the first egg is laid. The eggs hatch in the same order as they were laid, so there can be 2-3 weeks difference in age and size between the youngest and oldest chicks. When food is scarce, older and stronger owlets have a better chance of survival and may even trample or eat



their younger siblings. Chicks are covered with down when they are born. They make hissing, rasping screams and clicking sounds from sunset to sunrise, which is very disconcerting for home-owners. Many claim they have the 'devil living in their roof'.

The babies are fed by both adults for approximately 8-10 weeks, with the male doing most of the hunting. At 10 weeks they acquire their adult-like plumage and can begin to fly. They stay in the area of the nest site until they are 3 - 5 months old. Once they have left, the adults may then lay a second clutch of eggs. Depending on food availability and climate, they can produce up to 3

broods in a year.

What are the threats to a barn owls' survival?

Racoons, possums and dogs can kill the young owls and the great horned owl is a predator of the adult barn owl. However, as with most birds these days, the barn owl's biggest threat is humans.

Owls can become entangled on barbed wire and power lines when hunting. The use of pesticides and poisons by farmers and home owners can dramatically cut down the owl's food supply and it usually ends up poisoning the owl itself.

A lack of nest sites limits the reproductive ability of the birds: with better construction techniques, there are less roof spaces available to the owls and many owls that do find nest sites are disturbed or killed by humans.

If you find any creature hooked up on wire, do not try to untangle it yourself. Cut either side of the wire, leaving it attached to the bird or animal. Place the whole thing on soft towels in a box, put it somewhere quiet, warm and dark and contact the Belize Forest Department on 802 1524 or Belize Bird Rescue on 610 0400 as soon as possible



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Barn Owl Facts

- Barn owls mate for life
- Wild barn owls only live for an average of 2-3 years, yet in captivity they can reach up to 25 years
- Life is hard for a barn owl: 75% of chicks will die within 12 months
- A family of 2 adults and 6 young may consume over 1,000 rodents during the 3-month nesting period
- Barn owls do not hoot - they screech, hiss and scream
- Barn owls in Belize have a 4-foot wing span
- Even though the barn owl is about the size of a large cat, he only weighs around 16oz
- A barn owl is completely silent in flight, adding to its efficiency as a hunter
- Barn owls can hunt in total darkness, using just their ears to locate prey
- The barn owl's hearing is so good it can hear the heartbeat of a mouse from 30 feet away
- His ears are covered with feathered flaps that close for loud noises and open for soft sounds
- The heart-shaped feathers that form the edge of the barn owl's face create a disc, which works to trap and focus sound, rather like our outer ears
- Their eyes are fixed in their sockets, so they must turn their entire heads to change their field of vision
- The barn owl has super-long legs to reach right into the grass where mice use hidden runways to move around
- Farmers in Europe put up boxes to encourage barn owls: crops are safe from rats with these super-hunters around
- While perched, the barn owl has a habit of lowering its head and swaying from side to side, which can be very eerie to watch
- In Mesoamerican cultures the barn owl is a symbol of death and destruction but in Indian culture and Greek mythology, the Barn Owl is a companion to a goddess and is considered an omen of prosperity or wisdom



Now that you know a lot more about these amazing creatures, please think twice before doing them harm or disturbing their habitat and nest sites.

If you have a 'problem' owl, call Belize Forest Department on 802 1524.

If you find an injured owl or any other bird, contact the Forest Department during office hours, or Belize Bird Rescue after hours and on weekends 610 0400.

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How to keep barn owls out of your roof



Step 1: Seal Up Your Roof

All of the owl removals we are called to are because birds have nested in the roof space of a home, school or office building. Seal up any gaps larger than 4" between the walls and roof with wire mesh, foam or wood to keep the owls out in the first place. This makes sense since owls are not the only creature which likes living in roof-spaces and attics: possum, rats, snakes, rat-bats to name but a few! would happily make their home there too.



Step 2: Encourage nesting elsewhere

You really do want barn owls to hang around. They each eat several rats a night: a single family can eat 1000 during the three month breeding period.

Construct a very simple box and mount it onto a tree or post or the side of an out-building. The box needs to be waterproof with a hole or slot for entry and a flat surface inside. Your owls will be very comfortable and your yard will be rat-free.

