



Barn Owl nest site in the earth wall of a well. Researchers installing a camera in front of the nest for study

Habitat:

In plains and hills generally up to 1200 m altitude. Prefer human habitation and agricultural country. They occupy used as well as dilapidated houses and buildings in urban and rural areas where niches are available for hiding, wells with earth walls, ruins and fortifications.



Barn Owls with a rat, shrew and a mouse (latter is a trap camera photo). The barn owl is a rodent and shrew controller

Food:

Rats, mice, shrews, small bats, small birds, amphibians, small reptiles (geckos, lizards and rarely snakes) and large beetles.



Trap camera reveals the secret nocturnal life of the barn owl. The hungry nestlings come out of the artificial nest box to receive food when the parent arrives with a rat



Nest in a natural tree hollow



Nests in man made structures. The barn owl is an adaptive species.

Distribution:

Entire India except northern most Kashmir. Barn Owl is distributed globally except Antarctica, being the most widespread bird in the world.

Status:

Resident. Common.



Heart-shaped facial disc and golden brown dark spotted wings



Outer wing pattern of the rounded wing

Key Features:

- Round head, heart-shaped face with mobile facial disc.
- Golden buff to light brown plumage.
- Fine stippling on wings and breast feathers.
- Wings rounded and feather margins serrated.
- Male is smaller than the female.
- Bill horny to fleshy white; cere fleshy.
- Iris deep brown to black.
- Legs and feet pale brown to white.
- Claws dark.
- Young have stubby tail.



Largely white from the front



Inner wing pattern



Flat facial disc in side view



Serrated margin of the flight feather



Ear opening in the facial disc margin



Sole pad and sharp talons



Cultural Aspects:

It is variously known as the Silver Owl, Moon Owl, Monkey Owl, Ghost Owl, Screech Owl and Barn Owl. It is unfortunately shrouded in superstitious beliefs when it is wrongly and unjustly hunted for sorcery and black magic. On the contrary, in West Bengal, it is worshipped as the vehicle of Laxmi, the goddess of wealth.

Etymology:

Tyto (Gr.), an owl. *L. alba*, white. (Pande, Satish 2009).

Breeding and Phenology:



Pair formation, egg laying and new born naked fledgling



4 days, one week and two weeks old chicks



10 days, 14 days and 16 days old chicks



Chicks prior to fledgling resemble adults in plumage. Recently fledged chicks perch on a palm leaf

Nest:

No nest is built and eggs are laid in a natural hollow of a large fig or tamarind, etc. tree. Opportunistically nest in crevices, holes or space between roof and wall in buildings, attics, space above false ceilings with an opening for entry, bell towers, niches in broken wall of old fortifications, hollows in earth walls of wells, and similar places. Same sites are used if undisturbed.

Eggs:

2 to 7 eggs are laid in one clutch at an interval of 36 to 48 hours. Incubation begins with the first egg and hatching is asynchronous, hence the age difference between the oldest and youngest chicks in the same brood can be up to 14 days. Two clutches may be laid in one year.

Parental Care:

Female incubates and both parents feed the young with male bringing smaller prey and female larger prey, because of reversed sexual dimorphism.

Related species:

Andaman Barn Owl *Tyto deroepsoffi* is seen in Andaman Islands. Eastern Grass Owl *Tyto longimembris* occurs in southern Western Ghats, tip of peninsula and Eastern Ghats

Eastern Grass Owl



Amazing Facts:



Red eye shine from the tapetum



The facial disc is movable. The chicks of different ages with a white down



A Blue Rock Pigeon near the nest as chicks observe from inside the nest box. This is commonly observed



Both the parents bring food for the ever hungry chicks

They fly noiselessly due to saw-like margins of smooth feathers. They have a very acute hearing capability. Chicks utter screeches and are called Screech Owls. They are often misunderstood as flying ghosts due to their white body.

Barn Owl *Tyto alba stertens* (Hartert, 1929).

Type locality: Cachar.
Gavhani ghubad (Marathi); **Kuraya** (Hindi); **Chaao pitta** (Telugu); **Chavu kuruvi** (Tamil); **Veli munga** (Malyalam); **Laxmi pencha** (West Bengal).

- **Size:** 36 cm.
- **Weight:** 400 to 600 g.
- **Wing:** Male – 27.5 mm; Female – 32.2 mm.
- **Bill:** 30 mm (M); 32 mm (F).
- **Tarsus:** 68 mm (M); 77 mm (F).
- **Breeding Season:** Entire year.
- **Clutch:** 3 - 7 eggs. More than one clutch per year.
- **Eggs:** White, ovoid elliptical, smooth. Ovoid. 40.7 x 32.5 mm (Baker).
- **Incubation:** 32 – 34 d.
- **Nuptial Displays:** Flights and calls.
- **Call:** Screeches, chuckles, snorts and hisses. Nestlings are particularly noisy and this creates annoyance when the nests are near occupied houses.



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- **Research:** Ela Foundation's OENSL, Pune.
- **Design:** Kiran Velhankar, MediaNext Infoprocessors Pvt. Ltd.
- **Copyright and Published by:** Ela Foundation, C-9, Bhosale Park, Sahakarnagar-2, Pune 411009. March, 2013. An OENSL initiative. www.elafoundation.org.
- **References:** *Ali & Ripley (1969). *Satish Pande. (2009) Latin Names of Indian Birds Explained. Book made and Funded by Ela Foundation. Published by Oxford University Press and Bombay Natural History Society.
- **Recommended citation:** Pande, Satish & M. N. Mahajan (2016). Barn Owl. *Ela File* 27: 1-6. Ela Foundation, Pune.



Barn Owl

- **Order:** Strigiformes.
- **Family:** Tytonidae.
- **Status:** Resident.



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Flight:



The barn owls are accomplished noiseless fliers

Camera trap images in infrared light at night:



Activities of the nestlings: Lifting one leg; Standing in a row; Scratching; Mutual preening; Wing stretching



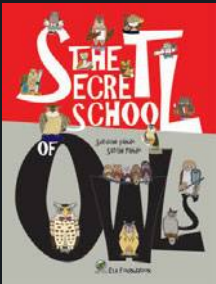
Wing flapping; Bending with extended wings; Aggression; Begging for food

Behavior:

Nocturnal, but can hunt during the day time. Usually sleep in a hollow or dense canopy during the day.

Conservation:

Protected by the Indian Wild Life (Protection) Act. They accept nest boxes and these can be offered in agricultural cropland. The Barn Owls have compromised thermoregulation due to sparse distribution of body feathers and are often found exhausted during very cold nights when providing warmth can save their lives. Education is the key to their conservation. 'Secret School of Owls' is the first comic book on owls by Ela Foundation.



Study of feeding and breeding behaviour is the basic step for scientific conservation. A rescued barn owl sits in a box



Economic Importance:

Consume up to 5000 rodents per year, hence offer agricultural services to farmers.

Threats:

Death due to consumption of poisoned rodents is a serious threat. They also die in road accidents and are killed by electrocution or for superstitious beliefs. They are often molested by crows. People drive away the owls by bursting crackers.



Addled eggs that failed to hatch



Road kill due to vehicle collision

Dr. Satish Pande, Dr. M. N. Mahajan, Rajkumar Pawar, Prashant Deshpande, Anant Gokhale, Dr. Satish Karmalkar and Sachin Haldule did field research for over 10 years.