

Bucks Owl and Raptor Group

*Promoting owl and raptor conservation
throughout Buckinghamshire*



www.giveahoot.org.uk

Issue 5

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Welcome all from your Chairman, Paul Holton. I took on the role in September 2019 after Alex stepped down, having led the group from its inception in 2012. He is still a member of the group and I'm sure will be maintaining a keen interest in future developments. Alex's time as chairman was critical in establishing BORG in the position it is now; his efforts are truly appreciated. Some of you already know me, but for those that don't, I've been working at Buckinghamshire's Council since 2004 as their ecologist and, back in 2006, helped establish the Aylesbury Vale Barn Owl Group, which eventually became BORG.

As you know many activities were curbed during the first few waves of the pandemic during 2020 and 2021. This virus impacted everyone and, in line with many other organisations, BORG had to suspend all activities until it was safe to re-commence visits. The birds of course, remained active throughout those lock-down events we had to endure, and the group were finally able to recommence monitoring activities in 2022. With so many boxes to get round in the county we are returning to work in earnest in 2023.

During those lean times of lock-down we continued with our box-making journey with the transition from wood to using recycled agricultural plastic waste. As a group we feel passionate about this switch and how it falls into wider environmental issues. The wood we used in the past had to be sourced from forests of course and the life span of the plywood was causing some concern. The new material is produced from recycled plastic meaning less is buried or incinerated. The finished boxes are considerably lighter so it's much easier and safer to get them up in the trees. Those plastic boxes we erected in 2019 have now been shown to be successful with chicks being reared and fledging so initial concerns over humidity and temperature have been overcome. We will be continuing to replace defunct wooden ones and all newly-erected boxes will be constructed from this material. The local Wildlife Trust, RSPB, Chilterns Conservation Board, and the National Trust have all been supportive of this project. There's a little more detail on this project in the updates.

The group survives with the support of its volunteers and the people who support us. I therefore have two big asks:

1. If you, or someone you know, is interested in volunteering with the group in any way, do reach out to us.
2. Friends of BORG has never been so important to us. Subscribing as a Friend provides us with an annual commitment which will enable the group to function, supporting landowners to ensure that Barn Owls, Kestrels, Tawny Owls and Little Owls thrive in Buckinghamshire. If you are not a Friend please consider becoming one and, again, spread the word to friends and family about the great work BORG volunteers get up to.

We all look forward to catching up with you and seeing how the birds are shaping up in 2023. If you want to keep up-to-date with all that is new, and some stuff that isn't, go and check out our Twitter account or web site (details below).

Paul Holton (Chairman)

Social Media and Web Site News

www.giveahoot.org.uk



The web site has recently been given a brief overhaul, but there are plans to give it a re-vamp in the not-too-distant future, so please bear with us if you try to access the site and find it unavailable. In the meantime it continues to provide our supporters with information on the services we provide and also what they, as individuals, can do to help and support us in our work. An integral part of this is the friendly and interactive nature of the site, enabling supporters to contact us directly.



The BORG **Twitter** feed (@Borg_Owl_Raptor) continues to grow and add to the work the group does, informing the wider public of our activities. At the time of writing we now have over 890 followers and the numbers are steadily growing.

Posts to our Instagram page ([borg_owl_raptor](https://www.instagram.com/borg_owl_raptor)) have been suspended until further notice.

However, we try to keep the Twitter account updated with news and photos of our work and other interesting owl and raptor news, so do keep checking it for your regular fix of raptor news!

Friends of BORG



It is now five-and-a-half years since we launched Friends of BORG, and recently our 139th individual Friend signed up to the scheme. Many signed up as part of the trial initiative in 2019, whereby we offered a discount on the cost of box purchases if a subscription were taken out at the same time. The initiative proved very successful and continues to this day.

We have recently added a new dimension to the scheme to take into account the growing involvement and support of larger, Corporate landowners. In addition to the individual subscription, at £30 per annum, we now have the added option of a Corporate subscription at £100 per annum.

The money generated by this scheme helps cover the ongoing operational costs involved in running our organisation, but in particular the day-to-day running costs, maintenance, tax and insurance for our faithful Land Rover – without which we would find it very difficult to access many of our box locations. Without this extra, regular support we would not be able to function and, rather than expanding our coverage throughout the county, we would have to make cut-backs.

So, we would like to say a huge “**THANK YOU**” to all our current Friends – without you we would not be able to continue this vital work.

Stokbord (Plastic Wood) – a viable alternative



As many of the plywood boxes we used were delaminating after only a couple of years, we began looking into alternative building materials and came across Stokbord. As a result of our initial research (see the article on our web site), carried out in the summer of 2019, the group began the gradual change-over to Stokbord – a “plastic wood” manufactured in the UK from recycled agricultural plastic such as that used to wrap silage. The Stokbord boxes are lighter than the plywood boxes, making them safer and easier to handle at heights; they should also last a lot longer than plywood boxes.

Installation of new boxes and the replacement of damaged ones with the new Stokbord boxes began in earnest during the winter season of 2019. In early February 2020, as we began the year’s monitoring season, and just before our movements were restricted due to Covid-19, we had confirmation that many of the new boxes were being used during their first season – not a foregone conclusion in any circumstances!

Over the past four seasons we have installed over 345 Stokbord boxes throughout Buckinghamshire and the results are continuing to prove positive as the boxes are, as we hoped, providing sound, safe alternatives to natural nest sites.

Monitoring News for 2020 - 2022

Due to the COVID pandemic the bulk of our monitoring ceased in 2020 and, despite being able to return to limited field operations, the restrictions which were still in place during 2021 meant that we again did not have a full set of results for the year. However, by 2022 most of the restrictions were lifted, although we did have to be aware of any issues related to the avian flu outbreaks, and with a few ongoing safeguards in place most of our volunteers were able to get back to their monitoring duties.

We have over 620 boxes throughout the county. However, we do not have the resources to monitor them all, so prioritise depending on previous successful use and whether it is a new installation. In all over 200 boxes were checked during the period 2020 to 2022, 119 of which were occupied giving the following results:-



KESTRELS. As Kestrels are on the Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC) Amber list we continue to install as many new boxes as we can to try and help boost their numbers. Over the past couple of years our results have been encouraging, with numbers of boxes occupied slowly increasing; in our 2020-2022 seasons we ringed 59 pulli (chicks) and one adult.

TAWNY OWLS. Tawny Owls are also on the BoCC Amber list, but unfortunately limited monitoring meant very few Tawny boxes were visited during this period so we have no real way of knowing just how many were occupied or successful. In all only eight pulli and one adult were ringed during the two years.



LITTLE OWLS. Despite installing more new boxes, the population is still in serious decline. While this may in part be due to a lack of suitable nest sites, we believe it is principally as a result of farming practices leading to a loss of habitat and consequently reduced food supplies. We ringed 14 pulli (although we know of four other pulli not ringed) and only one adult during 2020 - 2022.

BARN OWLS. The Barn Owl was moved from the BoCC Amber list to the Green list in 2015 and so far the population continues to do reasonably well locally and throughout the UK. In 2020-2022 we ringed 110 pulli and 54 adults and re-trapped (birds that had been previously ringed) a small hand-ful of adult birds.



Waddesdon Estate

During 2022 we were able to re-affirm our working relationship with the Conservation Team at Waddesdon Estate. BORG have monitored several sites within the estate boundaries over the years, but many of the boxes had, over time, become unusable or disappeared completely. After initial meetings and several site visits our volunteers confirmed which of the old boxes were still viable, before beginning a program of new box installations. Throughout the early part of the year we installed a mix of boxes including some Tawny Owl boxes that have been 'tweaked' to allow possible usage by Goosander. We had successful broods in some of the old boxes but, unfortunately, none of the new boxes gave rise to confirmed breeding, although several were used as roost sites – so fingers crossed for 2023!



Our final task of the year was to replace one of the decayed, but successful, barn owl boxes with a new Stokbord box. At the request of the Estate, the box was to contain a camera which will allow live streaming (via a medium of the Estate's choosing) of any future occupants. So, with the help and expertise of Chris Payne – thank you Chris, your help was invaluable - a box was duly designed and installed in late 2022. There are still a few tweaks and issues to be ironed out, but fingers crossed all will be working in time for the breeding season!

Central Chilterns Farmer Cluster Owl Box Project

In 2021-22, through our association with the Chilterns Chalk, Cherries and Chairs project, BORG began providing assistance to the Central Chilterns Farmer Cluster Owl Box Project. The project area covers approximately 6,500 hectares of farmed landscape, in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). To date our participation has involved installing and monitoring 78 Owl and Kestrel boxes. As a result of this work a total of 7 active Barn Owl boxes, 4 active Kestrel boxes and 2 active Tawny boxes were recorded across 18 farms during 2022.



Throughout the coming years BORG hopes to continue working with larger nature-based organisations like these to help provide landscape-scale conservation for the future.

2023 DIARY

We take the health and well-being of our volunteers and supporters very seriously and, as you may be aware, as a result of the restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic all events and community talks were cancelled. We have now reintroduced our educational and community activities and are taking enquiries for 2023 events.

We have several talks and events lined up already, which started in March with a day at College Lake. Our volunteers demonstrated the making and installation of boxes, together with pellet identification and dissection, to the BBOWT Young Rangers and Teen Rangers – Wildlife Clubs for 8-12 year-olds and 11-17 year-olds respectively.

Our volunteers may have visited you in the past few months to repair, replace or install new boxes. As Spring gets under way, they will begin the first of the season's box monitoring, starting with Tawny Owls.

MANY THANKS FOR YOUR ONGOING SUPPORT.

From all at BORG, take care and stay safe!



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