

# Bucks Owl and Raptor Group

*Promoting owl and raptor conservation  
throughout Buckinghamshire*



[www.giveahoot.org.uk](http://www.giveahoot.org.uk)

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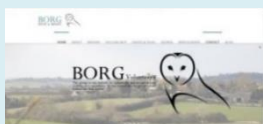
Happy New Year to you from all of us here at BORG. 2023 was a testing year for the group with the sad passing of Norman Shepherd in May. His unexpected death was a huge blow to all who knew him. Norman was one of the founders of the group and worked tirelessly promoting Barn Owl and Raptor conservation across the county. His appetite for life was always on show; many of you will have fond memories of his visits to the boxes he monitored. Even in areas of the county he didn't monitor, his influence is still be present, as he was instrumental in constructing many of the Stokbord boxes we now use; his legacy is dotted all over Buckinghamshire. The group have been working hard to ensure the strong relationships he built over his 15 years' volunteering with the group are maintained. We recently gathered to remember Norman and to establish a plan for 2024 to ensure all the work he and others have poured into the group can continue. We will endeavour to get round to as many of the sites as we can, and must apologise to those we were unable to visit, but rest assured we won't let the hard work Norman laid down go to waste. Collectively the group are looking forward to continuing his legacy and further raising the profile of Barn Owl and Raptor conservation across Buckinghamshire. We have a new cohort of volunteers ready to assist; we held a meeting at Waddesdon Estates to introduce them to the group and provide a demonstration of box construction. We will start to erect new boxes in the new year, ready for monitoring later in the spring and summer of 2024.

The group had many success stories last year, from a successful grant application to the Rothschild Foundation, to links with the Chiltern Conservation Board and the local Wildlife Trust. You can read some of these stories in more detail below. As always, we thank you all for your support. Your involvement with the group is critical for the conservation of Barn Owls and Raptors across the county. To those of you that are already Friends of BORG, the funds we receive enable the group to function and we are most grateful for your involvement. For those not yet signed up, please do consider doing so, as without this support the group won't be able to fully carry out the conservation work for these iconic birds of prey that we all love so dearly.

We look forward to seeing you in 2024 and to continuing our journey of Barn Owl and Raptor conservation across Buckinghamshire.

**Paul Holton (Chairman)**

# Social Media and Web Site News



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The web site has been given a brief overhaul during 2023, but there are plans to give it a bigger re-vamp in the not-too-distant future, with the help of our new ‘web masters’. 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** (X) feed, (@Borg\_Owl\_Raptor), continues to provide information to the wider public of our activities. At the time of writing we have 918 followers and the numbers are steadily growing.

Our Instagram page ([borg\\_owl\\_raptor](https://www.instagram.com/borg_owl_raptor)), although temporarily in limbo, provides another media platform via which our supporters can follow our work. Following the recent recruitment of new volunteers to the group, many of whom have social media experience, we are hoping to re-ignite the page with a variety of posts throughout the year.

We will try to keep the feeds updated with news and photos of our work and other interesting owl and raptor news, so do keep checking them for your regular fix of raptor news!

## Friends of BORG



It is now over six years since we launched Friends of BORG. Of the 153 registrations made since the scheme began, we now have 114 active individual Friends and two Corporate Friends 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.

The majority of our Friends pay their subscriptions via the Go Cardless direct debit scheme ([BECOME A FRIEND | Give a Hoot](#)), with a few still preferring to pay either by cheque or direct bank transfer. For those paying by the latter methods an annual reminder is usually sent – although this sometimes gets missed, so if you fall into this category and are not sure whether you are still up to date with your subscriptions please do get in touch!

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 Friends – without you we would not be able to continue this vital work.

# Monitoring News for 2023

We have over 650 boxes throughout the county. However, availability of monitors this year was limited, so we tried to prioritise depending on previous successful use and whether it was a new installation. The table below details the birds ringed in 2023 and does not include young birds too small to ring.

Species	Adults re-trapped	Adults ringed	Pulli (chicks) ringed	Total
Barn Owls	20	20	60	100
Tawny Owls		1	10	11
Little Owls			7	7
Kestrel			19	19
Stock Dove		1	19	20
Jackdaw			15	15
Total				172

## Barn Owls

The prolonged cold in the winter and a wet and chilly spring meant that Barn Owls took a while to get into breeding condition. The first box checks in May found barn owls paired up in nest boxes but very few had started to lay. This ties in with reports from groups in the West Midlands, Berks and the South West that nesting was delayed, and that some adults decided not to breed at all. The three nests that did hold eggs in May all failed, probably due to the lack of rodent prey. The majority of our birds that did nest laid eggs in late May/June with chicks hatching in July and August. At that time the weather was warm but unsettled, with lots of showers, which would have made hunting tricky. Clutch sizes were fairly small, with an average of 4.1 eggs per nesting attempt. The largest we found were two clutches of 7 eggs, which produced 3 and 4 chicks respectively. The majority of the successful nests held 2 or 3 chicks and we only had three nests this year that fledged more than that, with 4 chicks each. Two of these boxes were sheltered within barn buildings, including a box at the National Trust site near Bradenham that had a live video feed into their office. A late nest with eggs still in September was successful and we ringed our last chick on 11<sup>th</sup> October. Overall it was not a bad year; Barn Owls can be flexible to take advantage of the fluctuations in mammal prey and this year some birds bred later in the summer when the numbers of voles and rats had increased; others decided to keep their strength for their own survival. Hopefully these birds will get a chance next year.

The boxes we put up as part of the Chilterns project in 2020/21, paid for by the Chilterns Conservation Board, showed an increase in take-up over the first year as more owls found the new boxes. It is a pleasure to work with farmers and land managers who can directly affect the habitat used by wildlife.



We found a few beautifully marked darker barn owls this year. These are not ‘guttata’, the continental barn owl, but a darker form of the UK race, ‘alba’ and have all been females who are normally darker and spottier than male barn owls. A pair of older female chicks at Christmas Common in July show the variation in plumage. Another very attractive bird in a box near Cryers Hill (Ring No. FJ16018) was ringed in 2016 by the Bisham



Barn Owl Group and had moved into one of our boxes.

The table below details other adult Barn Owls that we caught this year that had been previously ringed (re-traps). It also includes dead birds, previously ringed by BORG, that were reported to the BTO by members of the public in 2023. You can see that while most birds do not move very far from where they were born, they often make use of a second box nearby and a few range more widely. Ringing birds at the nest helps to build a picture of how the birds are faring.

Adult Barn Owls re-trapped in BORG boxes during 2023								
Ring number	Age when ringed	Date ringed	Ringling location	Date re-trapped	Re-trap location	Age	Distance from place of ringing	Comments
FJ16018	Nestling	07/10/2016	Small Dean	09/06/2023	Cryers Hill	8 years	5km	
FJ16015	Nestling	05/09/2017	Ibstone	14/05/2023	Towersey	7 years	13km	
FJ16131	Nestling	23/07/2018	Cookham Moor	26/07/2023	Penn Street	6 years	8km	
FJ16142	Nestling	13/08/2018	Medmenham	20/06/2023	Christmas Common	6 years	12km	
GH85685	Nestling	15/05/2017	Bennett End	22/12/2023	Bradenham	7 years	5km	
GV19563	Nestling	28/06/2022	Wendover	15/08/2023	Oving	1 year	18km	
GV53280	Nestling	19/07/2017	Great Brickhill	16/02/2023	Burcott	7 years	8km	
GV70957	Nestling	31/05/2019	Chalfont St Giles	18/05/2023	Penn Street	5 years	4km	
GV86404	Nestling	19/06/2019	Woodham	24/03/2023	Whitchurch	5 years	12km	Same box since 2021
GY01080	Nestling	15/07/2022	Roughwood Park	24/05/2023	Roughwood Park	1 year	1km	different box nearby
GY26107	Adult	01/04/2021	Whitchurch	24/03/2023	Whitchurch	3+ years	-	Same box since 2021
GY26121	Adult female	05/05/2021	Forty Green	26/05/2023	Forty Green	3+ years	-	Pair together since 2021
GY26122	Adult male	05/05/2021	Forty Green	26/05/2023	Forty Green	3+ years	-	Pair together since 2021
GY26124	Adult male	05/05/2021	Horsendon	22/12/2023	Horsenden	3+ years	1km	different box nearby
GY26855	Adult male	28/05/2021	Penn	08/05/2023	Penn	3+ years	1km	different box nearby
GY26858	Nestling	01/07/2022	Mursley	11/10/2023	Chearsley	1 year	23km	
GY49202	Adult female	17/05/2022	Bradenham	22/12/2023	Bradenham	2+ years	3km	Different box same farm
GY68432	Adult female	15/06/2023	Lye Green	02/08/2023	Ashley Green	1 year	3km	Same year, different box
GY49245	Nestling	28/06/2022	Kingsey	26/05/2023	Longwick	1 year	5km	
Barn Owls ringed by BORG found/reported by others:								
GR99496	Adult male	03/05/2017	Addington	26/02/2022	Adstock	1760 days	<1km	Found dead
GV19564	Nestling	06/07/2022	Waddesdon Greenway	08/02/2023	Burcott	217 days	29km	Dead - Road casualty
GV86388	Nestling	14/06/2019	Chearsley	30/05/2023	Nash Lee	1446 days	13km	Caught by ringer in nest box
GV86441	Adult male	19/06/2022	Crawley Grange	19/03/2023	Cranfield	273 days	3km	Found dead - part eaten
GV19593	Adult female	08/06/2023	World's End	16/03/2023	Halton	281 days	2km	Freshly dead - road casualty
GY49247	Nestling	28/06/2022	Towersey	19/02/2023	Haddenham	236 days	5km	Found dead
GV86350	Adult female	22/05/2019	Oving	13/02/2023	Haddenham	1363 days	16km	Taken to Tiggywinkles - poor condition

For example, the nest box at World's End had a nest with three chicks in 2022 and we ringed both the adult female and the chicks. Sadly this year the female was found dead in Halton after being hit by a car, and was reported to the BTO by a member of the public. The new occupants of the World's End box failed to raise any young this year; the new female was probably a first-time mother; it was a challenging year and the chicks died. So, we were very pleased to discover that one of the chicks (Ring No. GV19563) from last year had survived and was now nesting successfully in one of our boxes near Oving, 18kms away.

## Tawny Owls

Tawny owls laid a little later than usual in 2023, and the wet and chilly spring affected the number of chicks raised. Although Tawny Owls can typically lay 2-4 eggs, most of the boxes with young held just one chick. April, and the beginning of May when the boxes would have held small chicks, was wet, and adults would have struggled to keep chicks warm, dry and fed, hence most nesting attempts producing just the one.

## Other birds

Stock Doves had a good year, making use of unoccupied owl boxes and sometimes moving in for a late clutch after owls had abandoned nesting for the year. Jackdaws and squirrels were not so much in evidence this year, as owls held territory in the early spring, but we cleared out any unused debris as part of our monitoring. We had a surprise in Cholesbury when a duck flew out of a tawny box we were checking; we found 8 duck eggs inside. It was a Mandarin, who are known to nest in tree cavities, and have been known to use our boxes before now, but still a surprise on Cholesbury Common away from any obvious water.



Lynne Lambert

## Waddesdon Estate – an update

Following the installation at the Waddesdon Estate of over 15 new boxes, including a camera box, in 2022 we were all eagerly awaiting the start of the 2023 breeding season to see whether any of the boxes had been used. Early signs indicated that at least one of the new Tawny Owl boxes would be used by the intended species, but unfortunately on later inspection this was not to be.

Other boxes on the Estate also had mixed success; we had one successful box with 4 Barn Owl chicks, others with adult Barn Owls and no chicks, and a failed kestrel nest. Given the numbers of Kestrels seen nearby later in the season, we think there is a possibility the pair had a second, successful brood elsewhere.



As some of you will be aware, probably the most interesting outcome this year came from the nest box containing the camera. As mentioned in our previous newsletter, the box and its camera were all set up and ready for the start of the breeding season. Monitoring the video feed between April and October revealed something of a soap opera.

Firstly we saw night-time visits, in early April, by a pair of Barn Owls, so we were hopeful of breeding later in the month. However, despite continuing night-time visits by the owls, several other species, including Kestrels, Stock Doves and Jackdaws, showed an interest by day.



By mid-May a female Kestrel had taken up residence and laid three eggs. This was not the end. Due to the diligence of our volunteers who regularly stayed up to watch the live feed in the wee small hours, we were able to witness regular night-time battles between the resident Kestrel and the visiting Barn Owls. We were concerned that the owls would win and the Kestrel would abandon her eggs. She left the box most nights, returning in the early morning to once again brood them. However, after many altercations the female Kestrel succeeded in repelling the owls and she went on to rear three healthy chicks.



Once the Kestrels had vacated the box and the surrounding area our volunteers cleared out the debris and freshened up the box ready for 2024. The birds though had other ideas. We witnessed not only a successful Stock Dove brood, but also more night-time visits by Barn Owls – probably the same pair as earlier in the year. It has been hugely insightful to see the full range of activity at the box, as normally of course we only see what is in residence on the few occasions we actually visit a box.

Unfortunately, the good old British winter sunshine has proved insufficient to keep the batteries charged, so we have closed down the system for the winter and will re-start it during March when, hopefully, the sunshine returns!

## Rothschild Foundation Grant

As part of our work we are always looking to find new ways to help with our monitoring, especially if it causes less disturbance to the birds. After much discussion the group agreed that a thermal imaging camera would be of huge benefit, particularly for the early pre-season monitoring. These cameras detect temperature via infrared light, which allows one to see the heat radiating from an object and its surroundings. Birds are warm-blooded so show up as a heat source; using such a camera allows us to determine from a distance whether the box is occupied. This not only causes less disturbance to any resident birds, but is also safer for our monitors as it requires less work at height.



In spring 2023 we therefore put together a proposal to purchase a thermal camera, along with several trail cameras and other, smaller sundry items. The proposal was submitted to the Rothschild Foundation Strategic Grant Scheme and in late April we were awarded £5,000, to be spent within one calendar year.



The first purchases were the thermal imaging camera and a couple of trail cameras. The thermal camera has already proved very useful in determining box occupation, whilst it and the trail cameras have given us useful information on the night-time visitors to our boxes and some of the other creatures that live near our box sites.

The remaining funds are being used to purchase further battery-operated tools, which will enable us to have a permanent 'mobile' tool kit for use by all our volunteers when they are carrying out site visits during both out of season repair and installation sessions and in-season monitoring. We also intend to purchase several sheets of Stokbord, together with other sundry supplies, to enable us to offer a small number of free, or discounted, boxes to landowners in areas where we believe additional boxes would help support an otherwise vulnerable owl population or would provide a wildlife corridor between existing boxes.

We have already given the Foundation an interim report on the purchases made and how they have helped us in our work and will give a further report, in mid-April, to complete the terms of the grant.

We are very grateful to the Foundation for their help and support – the results so far have been amazing!

## Spreading the word:-

The group gave a few talks in early months of 2023, including one by Norman to a local school group. He was somewhat apprehensive about this, as talks to schoolchildren were not his usual 'thing', he being more at home talking to farmers, W.I. Groups and local conservation groups. He need not have worried; the talk was well received with delight and enthusiasm, by pupils and teachers alike!



One of the bigger events of those early months was a day at College Lake, where Norman, Andy and Karen 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. It was a joy and delight to witness the enthusiasm and knowledge of these youngsters – some of whom may be the conservationists of the future!



We decided to cancel most events and talks after Norman's death in May. We were, however, able to attend the 'Waddesdon Estate Nature Week' event in July. It was a very wet and windy day, but there were plenty of visitors who braved the weather and visited us at our stand – and we made some good contacts for the future.





Although it may not have been the County Show, a last-minute favour by volunteers, Steve and Karen, saw them setting up a small stand at their local, weekly food market in the car park at Wing Village Sports and Social Club. The event proved a success, producing new enquiries, delighting the existing local box owners with pics of themselves on the display boards and enabling us to re-connect with a previous supporter

## 2024 DIARY

For 2024 we are hoping to get some of our more experienced volunteers up to speed on the skills required to enable us to continue providing stands at local events, as well as talks to interested parties, so if you would like a visit by BORG, please get in touch and we will see what can be done – no promises, but we will do our best to help!

Our volunteers may already have visited you in the past few months to repair, replace or install new boxes. As Spring gets under way, they will continue to install new boxes as they are built, before beginning the first of the season's box monitoring, starting with Tawny Owls, towards the end of February and early March.

MANY THANKS FOR YOUR ONGOING SUPPORT.  
From all at BORG, take care and stay safe!



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