

Bucks Owl and Raptor Group

*Promoting owl and raptor conservation
throughout Buckinghamshire*



www.giveahoot.org.uk

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Reports from various areas across the UK are confirming that 2025 is becoming one of the worst breeding years for owls in many years. Both Barn Owl and Tawny Owls are remarkably resilient, but their survival hangs on their needs for their prey and whether land can support enough to feed hungry chicks. Small mammal populations naturally rise and fall in cycles but in recent years these cycles appear to be more extreme, accentuated by changes in farming practices, loss of rough grassland and the steady erosion of habitat diversity.

This is why now, more than ever, groups such as ours are essential to engage with the wonderful landowners we work with, interact with the public and of course spend countless days monitoring these majestic birds in our beautiful county.

The hard work that all in the group perform and the interaction with landowners across the county is helping us track what's happening in Buckinghamshire and contribute significant data to the national database on the species we monitor.

2025 has also been a significant 'mast' year for our trees, particularly the Oak. With an unusually high increase of acorns produced it is anticipated small mammal populations will rise again in 2026. The incredible work the group performs across the county will help us understand these trends.

To the many members of BORG, I can't thank you enough for what you do and to the landowners that are engaged in this project, your involvement is so critical for us to maintain a viable population of owls and raptors.

Despite the low breeding numbers this year there are success stories some of which you can read in this update. To all I wish you well and look forward to continuing our quest to preserve, enhance and monitor these majestic birds in our wonderful county.

Paul Holton (Chairman)

Social Media and Web Site News



www.giveahoot.org.uk

The web site 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.

Our Instagram page ([borg_owl_raptor](https://www.instagram.com/borg_owl_raptor)), now provides our only active social media platform via which our supporters can follow our work. We now have a total of 146 followers – a growth of 23% over the past year. In the period between 10th Nov and 10th Dec 2025 we had 561 views and 28 interactions, compared to early 2025 when we had only 251 views and 18 interactions in 90 days. Our non-follower engagement is increasing month on month too. This is a significant improvement in overall engagement and very encouraging. Our most viewed story was that of Karen and her colleagues installing a Barn Owl box at a farm on the Waddesdon Estate.

If you have our boxes on your property and have your own IG accounts why not share the details with BORG; we can then mutually follow one another and spread the word about owl and raptor conservation even further!



The BORG Twitter (X) feed had an amazing 900+ followers by the end of 2024. However, due to the increasingly toxic content, we took a decision in early 2025 to hibernate the account for the foreseeable future.

Friends of BORG



It is now over six years since we launched Friends of BORG. Of the 172 registrations made since the scheme began, we now have 116 active Friends, six of whom are Corporate Friends. Many signed up as part of a 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. However, one doesn't have to own a box to be a Friend, anyone who has an interest in helping support our work, and hence these majestic birds, can sign up to the scheme.

As you can see from the numbers we have also had many Friends leave the scheme. There can be many reasons for this, including relocation, illness etc, but unfortunately for many cancellations we do not know the reasons. However, while ultimately this does not change things, it would be good for our group to know and understand what makes folk leave the scheme and whether there is anything we can do to encourage them to stay. To this end we now send out a 'Thank you for your support' letter together with an enquiry as to why they have chosen to leave the scheme.

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.

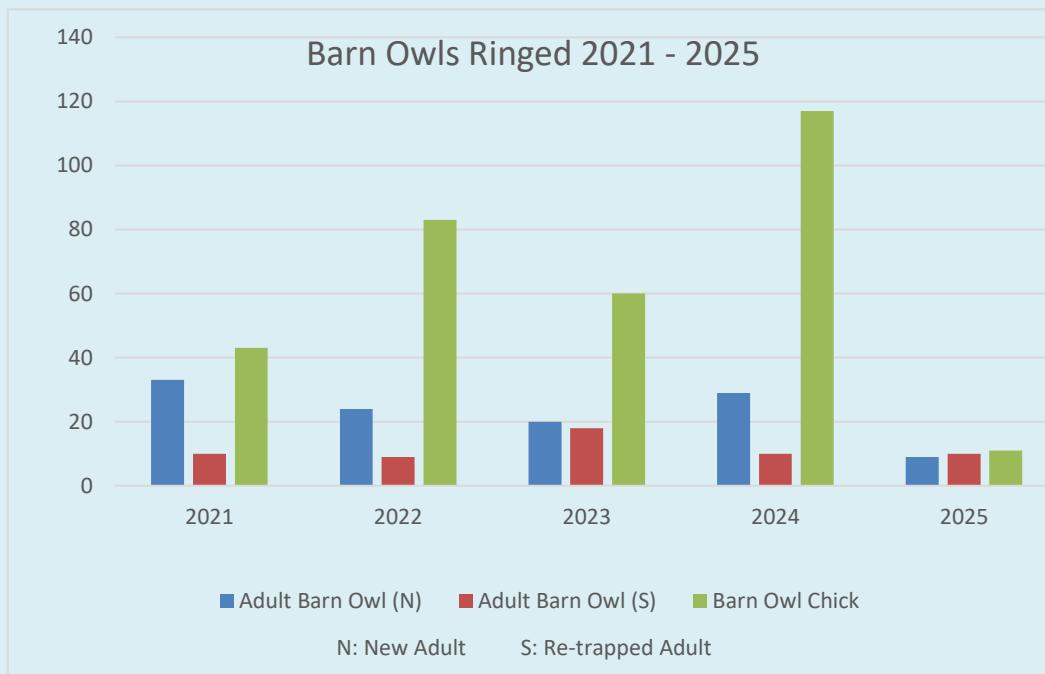
So, we would like to say a huge "THANK YOU" to all our Friends – without you we would not be able to continue this vital work.

Monitoring News for 2025

	Adult	Adult	Pullus	
	New	Retrap	New	Total
Barn Owl	10	9	10	29
Tawny Owl			2	2
Little Owl	1		11	12
Kestrel			14	14
Peregrine		1	3	4
Jackdaw			10	10
Stock Dove	1		2	3
Total	12	10	52	74

After last year's successful breeding, hopes were high as we started checking boxes in spring 2025. The first boxes we check are Tawny Owl boxes, as they nest early in the year, but by early May it was apparent that it was going to be a poor Tawny year. At Penn Woods not one of the 6 boxes there held owls, for the first time in 17 years of checks, and other reliable boxes around Cholesbury and Waddesdon were also empty. The local rescue centre admitted their first Tawny Owl chick in May, when they usually start getting them in in March.

Barn Owls sadly followed suit. In mid-May Nick, Mat and I spent a full day checking 21 boxes in central Chilterns and did not find a single Barn Owl; boxes that had been used last year were either empty or had Jackdaws. We did find one Tawny Owl chick in a Kestrel box! At this point we were hoping the breeding season would just be a late one, which can happen if the vole population builds slowly. However, as the summer went on it became apparent that most of the birds were just not planning on breeding this year. We found a few adults in the boxes but these were mainly single birds rather than pairs and by the end of June we found owls in full moult – a sign that they consider the season over. We carried on checking though and managed to look at 216 boxes between us, a record! The final tally of four successful nests and 10 chicks is in stark contrast to last year (54 nests and 120 chicks). The four successful boxes were quite widely spaced across mid-Bucks; Shabbington, Cuddington, Bradenham and Eddlesborough.



The general opinion is that the very dry spring that held back grass growth, had a negative impact on the vole population and consequently the owls that depend on them for food.

Little Owls did better than Barn Owls as they can feed on a variety of insects and invertebrate prey. We ringed 11 Little Owl pulli from 4 nests. Kestrel should have fared better as they can also eat a variety of insect food but we only found four successful nests compared to last year's bumper 26 nests. Even the Jackdaws and Stock Doves did not do well; despite finding many stock doves attempting to breed in the unoccupied boxes we found many failed clutches.



The peregrines at Aylesbury County Hall fledged three male chicks which we ringed and colour-ringed on 21/5/25 – the colour-rings are orange with black letters TXR, TYR and TZR. We hope that these birds will be spotted and reported by bird watchers as they disperse and look for new territories of their own. The adult peregrine in the table above was a colour-ringed bird in Thame (ringed in Bath) spotted online by Luke while working at the Bird Observatory on Fair Isle.

Ringing Recoveries

One of the boxes that did have successful breeding Barn Owls, near Shabbington, also had two ringed adults in the box. By checking the ring number records we found that the female had been in the same box since 2023. There had been no breeding there last year but this year she was back in the box with a new mate who was a male that had fledged from a neighbouring farm in 2024.

Another bird that had been ringed as an adult female in 2022 was found in a different box a few kilometres away in Holmer Green with a mate but not breeding this year.

Kenny, who monitors in the MK area found a pair of ringed Barn Owls in a box; one had originally been caught wintering in the Linford Lakes area in November 2024, and the other had been ringed as a chick in July 2024 near Whipsnade, approximately 25 miles away.



Finally, our most interesting recovery came from Shalstone up in the north of the county. In February we were called out to put an emergency box up at a breeding site where the barn needed re-roofing after winter gales had started to lift the slates. The two birds in the barn both had rings; one was the resident female who had been breeding at the site since 2021. The other was a male and had a ring we did not recognise: he turned out to have been ringed as a chick in Dorset in 2022, a movement of 137km.

Lynne Lambert

Peregrine Falcon

Peregrine falcons first appeared on the high-rise Council office building in Aylesbury in 2007. A platform was erected on the exterior of the 12th floor in 2010; the birds' first breeding attempt took place the following year and they have returned every year since. The birds are supported and monitored by our good friends in the Bucks Bird Club (<https://www.bucksbirdclub.co.uk/>). The live-stream activity from the platform can be seen by going to You Tube and searching for "Aylesbury Peregrine".



We have collaborated with them over the years and were lucky enough to be called in to help monitor and ring this year's chicks, in May. Timing for ringing Peregrine chicks is crucial. Too young and they are not big enough to take a ring; too old and they are liable to attempt escape by fledging too early, which could be fatal.

A combined Bucks Bird Club and BORG team assembled at the Council offices and took the lift the 12th floor. No hoists or ladders, but taking the back off the platform and leaning out to retrieve chicks, with safety harness of course, is still an adrenaline-pumping situation! Neither chicks nor adults were pleased to be disturbed; the adults took to the air and flew close escort on the building for the entire time we were there, while the chicks hissed and squawked at us almost continually.



It was important to be as fast as we could; bird welfare is obviously paramount. What followed was a frenetic (and noisy) 45 minutes during which the three chicks were each weighed, measured, ringed (twice) and had DNA samples taken. As well as a standard BTO metal ring on one leg, on the other leg we attached “Darvic” rings, named after the material from which they are made. These carry large identification letters designed to be readable in the field, from a distance (you’ll still need binoculars or a scope!), making it easier to track live birds. BTO rings are more durable but typically are only read when the bird is recaptured (highly unlikely with an adult Peregrine) or found dead.



The DNA sampling is not something we do for other birds. Peregrines are much sought-after for racing in the Middle East, and sadly there is an active illegal trade in taking them from the wild and selling them on. It can be legal to trade in birds which have been bred in captivity; not so for birds born in the wild. In order to protect them, a national DNA database for Peregrines now exists, based on work done by the University of Leicester. Where birds are found in private hands in suspicious circumstances, a DNA comparison can confirm where they came from. Results from the samples we took have

gone to this database, so if these birds should ever be found being traded we will have provided clear evidence of their being born in the wild, and that a crime has been committed. Sampling taken from other birds country-wide will, it is hoped, severely restrict such illegal activity. A successful prosecution based on similar evidence was reported from Berwickshire early last year (go to www.bbc.co.uk and search for “Peregrine DNA” for more details).

Our thanks to Mike Wallen and the Bucks Bird Club for the opportunity to work together with these stunning birds.

HOT OFF THE PRESS: Mike Wallen has recently approached us for help with the installation of a new peregrine platform on St Mary’s Church in Thame. This project is in the very early stages, but do look out for further information on social media as the year progresses.

Spreading The Word

Following the death of our colleague, Norman (our main ‘talk’ presenter), and a rather too long period during which the group have been unable to provide a programme of talks, we are now back up and running! After much hard work by Steve, we now have a set of basic, PowerPoint presentation slides which members of the group will be able to use to aid them when giving talks and presentations to outside organisations. These were put to good use throughout the year for presentations to:

- The BBOWT Chilterns Group (Steve Thomas)
- College Lake Young Rangers (Steve & Karen Thomas and Lynne Lambert)
- Long Crendon (Mark Ritson)
- Prestwood Nature (Mike Collard)
- Aylesbury RSPB Group (Steve Thomas)



BBOWT Chilterns Group

This was the first outing for Steve, as a talk giver, using the newly created slides. Despite his pre-meeting nerves all went to plan and the evening finished on a very positive note, with a request for a talk to the Aylesbury RSPB Group later in the year.



College Lake

One of our bigger events of this spring was a return visit to College Lake, where Steve, Karen and Lynne talked about our work to the BBOWT Young Rangers and Teen Rangers – wildlife clubs for 8-12 year-olds and 11-17 year-olds respectively. The day included a walk around the reserve to view their existing owl and kestrel boxes, before returning to the classroom to the delights of pellet identification and dissection. It was a joy and delight to witness the enthusiasm and knowledge of these youngsters; several had attended our previous visits and some now wish to join us next year for work experience opportunities.

Aylesbury RSPB Group

I think this talk was not only requested following the earlier talk to the BBOWT Group, but was also an outstanding talk that was cancelled following the death of Norman Shepherd. Steve seemed to once again put on a well-received talk covering the basics of the birds we work with, followed by more detailed accounts of the actual work we do throughout the county.



Members of the group also attended a couple of local events (Waddesdon Conservation Hub, Long Marston Village Show and the Bucks County Show) with our lovely new gazebo and newly improved display boards, although unfortunately had to cancel our attendance at the Emberton Country Park 60th Birthday Celebrations in July due to difficulties with the Land Rover!



Waddesdon Nature Event

Since the opening of their Conservation Hub, in what used to be the Café in the Woods, BORG have joined the folks at Waddesdon for several of their nature days. May Bank Holiday 2026 was no exception, when BORG volunteer and Waddesdon Internee, Mark Ritson, manned the hub dispensing advice and information about our work and, more specifically, our work with the team at Waddesdon.



Long Marston Village Show

Although not the County Show, early August saw Steve and Karen setting up a small stand at the Long Marston Village Show. The event proved a success, producing new enquiries and great deal of local interest in our work.

Bucks County Show

In August our volunteers manned an exhibition stand at the Bucks County Show – something we have been able to do most years since 2016. It is always a pleasure to catch-up with landowners and old friends, but also to meet new people and spread the word about the work we undertake to help conserve these wonderful birds.



Box Builders Extraordinaire



Central to BORG's activities is the building and installation of nest boxes. For the past five years or so we have built new boxes from a material called Stokbord, which is made in the UK from recycled farm plastic. It seems a good use of recycled material, but it has other key benefits over plywood, notably that it promises to last a lot longer - we had experienced some plywood boxes delaminating within 18 months of installation - and that it is considerably lighter, making it safer to handle when installing boxes at height. Experience thus far shows the birds take to it equally as well as they did to plywood boxes.

There continues to be a steady stream of requests for new boxes from existing landowners, farming groups and from those we meet at events like the County Show. In this last year alone we have been asked for something in the region of 50-60 new boxes. That's great news but it creates a lot of work!

Our box designs have evolved with the new material, and continue to evolve. There are some more-or-less fixed parameters: Barn Owl boxes have a wider base than those for Tawnies; Kestrels like an open front; Little Owls like a tunnel into a dark interior. There is also plenty of room for variation, from construction methods, through type of fixture to design of access door for our use when monitoring.



There is no doubt that our leading light in the matter of design and construction has been our volunteer Nick Payne. Nick has not only come up with designs which sensibly use the same size of componentry for different boxes (the side of a Barn Owl box is exactly the same size as that for a Tawny box, for example), but he has designed a completely new and much improved access door mechanism, using a sliding door in place of various previous screw-based designs, which often proved hard to undo and ended up wearing out. Nick's attention to detail has resulted in a simple but beautifully-engineered chamfered door which by common consent is the best we've ever had.

Along the way, almost as an incidental, we can now produce "flat pack" boxes for others to assemble with screwdriver and glue, whether that be landowners or our own volunteers at home, something we'd talked about in the past but never really landed. It remains to be seen how much demand for flat-packs there will be, but there's no doubt the whole construction process has, under Nick's direction, become much more efficient: by no means automated but still a veritable production line.



Nick has his own workshop at home (some think he just happens to have a house attached to his workshop!) and he has welcomed bulk delivery of Stokbord, aided by volunteer help from several other members of the group, resulting in the production of boxes by the dozen this year.



We simply could not have met demand without him. Thank you, Nick.

Land Rover – our very necessary vehicle

BORG uses the Land Rover we acquired from AVDC when we started up in 2012. It wasn't new then, and over a decade on it has covered well over 100,000 miles. It is an essential tool for us, used not only for carrying people, nest boxes, tool-kits and ladders across some very rough ground, but also itself acting as a platform when we are able to park it close enough to a tree. There's no doubt that being able to arrive in a liveried vehicle not only announces our presence but also helps project a strong and serious image for the group.



As a bunch of unpaid volunteers, the group's expenses are small. We take no wages and we pay for our own branded workwear. While we do have to pay for public liability insurance, for example, the Land Rover is clearly our main ongoing expense. A full tank of fuel now comes close to £100. The cost of a new set of tyres is eye-watering.

The good news is that old-style Land Rover Defenders are still readily serviceable. We are very grateful to Alex Engineering (www.alexengineering.co.uk) who look after our vehicle; they have several times gone out of their way to fit us in when we have a problem. And this year there have been a few problems.



The starter motor failed in August, meaning the vehicle had to be recovered on a low-loader. Alex replaced it very quickly. The clutch failed the following month, leaving Lynne the challenging experience of driving without one in order to get it home. She rose to the challenge!

In the background, for some time we had been experiencing a loss of power, at largely unpredictable times; suddenly the "oomph" would disappear, leaving the Land Rover still drivable but slowing down to the point where changing down gear and accelerating was necessary, but still resulted in us holding up traffic. The Alex team traced the fault to the turbo unit. Initial rewiring helped for a while but sadly didn't fully solve the problem, so then they fitted an entirely new turbo unit for us.

Then they tackled another long-standing problem which went from irritant to real issue: the ignition-based steering lock tended to jam, making for a lot of jiggling of the steering wheel when trying to start, sometimes accompanied by an inventive vocabulary from the driver. That eventually became almost completely unusable; Alex fitted a new ignition key unit and that problem has been solved.

We ask ourselves frequently whether it is right to keep the vehicle or whether we should replace it. The current consensus is that while it remains serviceable the cost of a replacement would considerably outweigh the ongoing service costs. It's not simply the price of a replacement vehicle (whether new or second-hand); our Land Rover has a custom roof platform, internal storage dividers and external artwork, all of which would cost additional time, money, or both to replicate.

Our vehicle has had a tough year. But it's also taken us along deeply-rutted and very wet farm tracks, across fields and through woodland as well as forming the backdrop to our stand at the County Show. Not everyone in the group loves to drive it (some do!), but we're all proud of it one way or another.



2026 Diary

Following on from our latest ventures into the world of public speaking in 2025, we are hoping to encourage more of our experienced volunteers to take on the role of 'Talk Presenter' which will 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 into early March.

Finally, to end on a more positive note and to show we did have some success this year...



Three youngsters from a successful Barn Owl nest at Cuddington



Claire taking measurements from the wing of one of the young Barn Owls at Cuddington

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