

Native Range Map



Common Barn Owl

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Aves
Order: Strigiformes
Family: Tytonidae
Genus: *Tyto*
Species: *alba*



Photo courtesy of Lynne Panebianco

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The barn owl is the most widespread owl and can be found in temperate and tropical regions on all continents except Antarctica. In order for a barn owl to settle in an area, it needs a cavity to nest in, which can include barns, hollow trees, dug out cliff-sides, and church steeples. Man-made nest boxes are also very commonly used by the barn owl.
- **Exhibit Location:** Adaptation of Animals

Characteristics

- Length: 13-16 inches; Weight: 14-24 ounces; Wingspan: 39-49 inches
The female is slightly longer and heavier with a slightly greater wingspan than the male.
- The face of the barn owl really distinguishes it from other owl species. It has a white, heart-shaped face with dark eyes. The orange-brown stiff feathers around its face are what make this owl in a different family than all other owls.
- The head is smooth and rounded without ear tufts. The back of its head and back have rusty colored feathers with small black spots. The front of the owl has white-gray feathers. The long legs of the barn owl are sparsely feathered and the feet are a gray color. This coloration keeps them from being seen during the day.
- Their sharp talons are used for seizing prey, while the hooked beak tears meat. Eyes are in front of the head for depth perception, better hunting, and avoiding obstacles.
- Owls have an amazing sense of hearing. It has been shown that they can hear a mouse running underneath the snow! They use their round facial disk to trap and isolate sound so they know exactly where to dive for their prey. They also have asymmetrically placed ears so they can listen in 2 different locations at once. Because of their sensitivity to noise, they have feathered earflaps that can cover their ears if the noise level is too high.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** 10 years (record is 34 years for a banded bird); **In Captivity** 20 years

Behaviors

- Barn owls are arboreal, spending most of their time in trees.
- They are usually sedentary, which means they stay in one area for most of their lives. Very few barn owls migrate.
- Barn owls are nocturnal and spend most of their day sleeping in their nest cavity (tree cavities, cliff crevices, riverbanks, barns, nest boxes, church steeples, and other man-made structures).
- They are typically solitary, but are sometimes found in pairs.
- The call of the barn owl is a raspy, long, hissing shriek that can be very startling. This call helps to deter predators. There are many different varieties of the call and each has a different meaning. Owlets perform a call that means they are hungry or they want attention. Adults call to warn other owls and to advertise themselves when looking for a mate.
- When hunting in darkness, they rely on their acute hearing. Their downy feathers help them approach prey practically undetected.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** live insects, small strips of leather, tennis balls

Reproduction

- Sexual maturity is reached at 1 year of age.
- Barn owls are usually monogamous (have one mate). Breeding can occur any time during the year, depending on the food supply. When food is scarce, they lay fewer eggs or may not breed at all.
- Courtship starts with the males displaying by chasing the females and calling. During the chase, both screech. The male will also hover with his feet dangling in front of the perched female for several seconds (moth flights).
- Pairs will often use the same nest every year. The female usually lays 4-7 eggs per season. Incubation is about 34 days, with the female laying 1 egg every 2-3 days. Only the female does the brooding, and the male brings food to the female and the chicks. The female feeds the chicks by tearing the food into small pieces.
- Chicks will leave the nest after adult plumage is acquired (about 50 days) and will become completely independent after about 3-5 weeks after their first flight.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** young rabbits, fish, voles, shrews, rats, mice small reptiles, amphibians, small birds
- **At the Zoo:** mice and small rats

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** not listed; **CITES:** not listed
- Barn owls are protected under the U.S. Migratory Bird Treaty Act. On a federal level, they are not threatened or endangered, but in some states such as Michigan and Wisconsin, they are considered endangered.
- Some barn owl populations are in danger because of pesticides (causing weak and thin eggshells), climate changes, and nesting site loss. If there is a harsh, cold, and long winter, barn owls usually freeze to death and do not make it to spring to breed. This is because they do not store extra body fat for harsh weather like other birds. In some areas, where nesting cavities are declining, the barn owl is also declining. Without a sufficient nesting activity, the barn owls will not breed.
- Predators: great horned owls, golden eagles, red kites, goshawks, buzzards, peregrine falcons, lanners, eagle owls, tawny owls, snakes

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- Barn owls have excellent low light vision and they also see well by day.
- Barn owls attack prey in low, slow flights, capture them with their feet, nip the prey at the back of the skull with their bill, and swallow the prey whole.
- The female owl will eat the feces of her owlets to keep her nest clean!
- The barn owl is also known as the “monkey-faced owl,” “ghost owl,” and the “golden owl.”
- Owls eat their prey whole and then regurgitate what they cannot digest such as the fur, feathers, and bones as pellets. You can dissect an owl pellet and piece together the skeleton of the last animal the barn owl ate. The pellet is quite dry and soft to the touch.

Sources:

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