

OWLS

Owls are distinctive looking birds. They have large forward-facing eyes, a hawk-like beak, a clear circle of feathers around each eye and a stumpy body. As with other birds, an owl's eyes are fixed in their sockets and in order to look in different directions they must turn their entire head. Owls are far-sighted and cannot clearly see anything within inches of their eyes.



Owls are usually only seen at dusk for they are active at night. Many can hunt by sound in total darkness. They are useful birds as they destroy great numbers of rats and mice. Their plumage is so soft that they make little sound when in flight. As well as rats and mice, which they swallow whole, they also catch rabbits, voles, insects, worms and other birds. They cannot digest bones and fur, so some time after their meal these remains are brought up in pellets.

The three types of owls found in Ireland are the Barn Owl (see box below), the Long-eared Owl and the Short-eared Owl.

The **Long-eared Owl** gets its name from the two tufts of feathers that grow on its head. Though they look like ears, they are not at all. The owl's upper parts are grey-buff in colour, which are striped and mottled with dark brown, and its under parts are buff with dark brown streaks. It has a long-drawn-out moaning hoot.

The **Short-eared Owl** is slightly larger than Long-eared Owl. It too has tufts of feathers on its head, mimicking ears, and these tufts are shorter than those of the Long-eared Owl. It is rarer than other owls and is active by day. Paler than the Long-eared Owl and with very noticeable feathers around its face, it has a shrill call and is found on moors, marshes, fens and sand dunes.

The largest owl in Britain (but not found in Ireland) is the **Tawny Owl**. It is a stout bird with reddish-brown upper parts and buff under parts, both with dark brown markings. This is the owl that utters the tuwhitt-toowhoo call. It also has a kewick call and is found in woods, parks and gardens.

The Barn Owl is usually only seen at dawn and dusk. It nests in tree holes, old buildings, and barns (from where it gets its name). When the barn owl flies, its legs can be seen dangling underneath. As it hunts for food it uses sound to find prey. Its hearing is so good that it can hear creatures moving around below while it is flying. The barn owl is sometimes called the screech owl as it has a long-drawn-out shriek which can sound quiet eerie on a dark night. If seen flying at night, it is quite ghost-like due to its golden and grey coloured upper parts and white face and under parts.

Colour: Golden-honey coloured, with dark marks and white underneath. White, heart-shaped face and large black eyes.

Length: 33-39 cm

Diet: Mainly mice and rats.

Habitat: Farmyards, gardens and woodlands.

No. of eggs: 4-6

Barn Owl



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