

WESTMINSTER BIODIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP LOCAL BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

TAWNY OWL *Strix aluco*

The tawny owl is a bird of woodland and well-wooded parks and gardens. It is the most common owl over much of Britain, although it is absent from Ireland. Like most owls, it hunts by night and roosts during the day, although it has been known to hunt during broad daylight if hard pressed at nesting time. Prey includes small mammals, especially mice, voles, young rats and shrews, some birds and occasionally fish, frogs, molluscs, worms and insects.

Tawny owls are mottled brown with a round facial disc and dark brown eyes. Both sexes are alike. They do not build nests, but lay their eggs from March to May in old tree holes, squirrel's dreys and occasionally in old buildings, rock crevices or on the ground. The female incubates the eggs, usually between 2 and 4 on her own, but the young are fed mainly by the male.

1. CURRENT STATUS

The best available estimate of the British population is around 20,000 pairs (D W Gibbons 1993), with that population probably being stable. Within London, the tawny owl is to be found in at least 12 of the 16 tetrads west of St Paul's (Montier 1977). Numbers are believed to have fallen in the 1980s, but recovered in the 1990s. They range over large areas when hunting at night, but it is likely that there may be as many as ten pairs/territories within inner London (Osborne 1996).

Recent Inner London Records:

Kensington Gardens: 1994 two territories. 1996 one pair bred.

Hyde Park: 1996 one pair bred. 1998 and 1999 one territory.

Green Park: 1998 young owlet picked up by member of the public.

Buckingham Palace Garden: 1997 nest with eggs found.

Regent's Park: 1998 four territories. 1999 nesting in owl box.

Proof of breeding is usually the result of a member of the public finding an owlet. A nestbox is known to have been used in Kensington Gardens in at least two years recently, but it is not known if successful breeding occurred. The London Biodiversity Audit records the tawny owl as breeding in Westminster.

The tawny owl has been selected as one of the priority species for Westminster as it is the top carnivore of many foodwebs in the city and is also relatively scarce. It has strong links with two of the Westminster habitat action plans – parklands and vertical habitats – and could be effectively used as a flagship species for both these habitats.

2. ECOLOGICAL DATA

Tawny owl is the most common owl nesting in the London area. It has adapted well to urban life where conditions are suitable. Nesting has occurred in most of the central Royal Parks where suitable feeding and nesting sites are available.

Owls prefer secluded areas for nesting. Nest sites are likely to be successful if they are sufficiently high to deter cats from reaching them. Owlets tend to leave the nest some time before they can fly, often climbing around the branches near to the nest. It is then that they frequently fall to the ground and become vulnerable to dogs and cats. A secluded nest site in a garden or square, not generally open to the public, is therefore preferable. Prior to Dutch Elm disease, owls could easily be seen in Kensington Gardens in broad daylight, as they roosted in the hollows of the tall elms. After the elms were lost, the strong winds of 1987 and 1989 further reduced the supply of large, hollow trees, such as beech and ash.

In addition to nest sites, owls often like to roost nearby. For this they prefer a secluded area, and favourites sites include ivy covered trees, holly trees and holm oaks (evergreen).

The relative catholic nature of the owl's diet enables it to exploit a wide range of habitats and prey items. In a study in Holland Park in the early 1960s (published 1964), the diet of tawny owls was found to contain 90% birds (mainly house sparrows, feral pigeons and starlings – note: this study took place before the recent local crash in sparrow populations). At Bookham Common (in Surrey), the study showed that mammals accounted for 90% of their prey (Beven 1965). Pellets collected in the Royal Parks contained wood mouse and a noctule bat. The owl therefore shows a remarkable ability to exploit available sources of prey, no doubt helping it to succeed in a densely populated environment.

3. CURRENT FACTORS AFFECTING TAWNY OWLS IN WESTMINSTER

People-related Factors

- Old trees which provide suitable nesting sites are sometimes considered a danger to the public and are felled, whereas some safety work on a few selected trees, particularly where some hollowing exists, might preserve them a little longer for owls.
- Traffic is a major killer of owls, particularly when they are hunting at night.
- It is likely that as rats and mice become more resistant to poisons, residues in their bodies may affect their predators. Toxins will become accumulated, and may lead to early death and/or breeding failure.

Ecological Factors

- The loss of suitable nesting sites, through disease and weather conditions, has undoubtedly caused the tawny owl problems in Westminster.
- The proximity of tall evergreen trees, for example holm oak and yew, which are essential for roosting and which help adults to become acquainted with an area and its food sources, is important. It is also important to maintain ivy growth on tall, mature trees. The presence of ivy is likely to encourage roosting and nesting. Tree management for owls is therefore a necessity, as is planting a succession of trees to grow to senescence.

4. CURRENT ACTION

The Royal Parks, where the tawny owl has been recorded in Westminster, are designated as sites of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation. However, whilst the presence of old trees and dead wood are recognised as important by park staff, there are no specific policies aimed at establishing suitable nesting and roosting sites for tawny owls.

Nest boxes have been erected in some locations, particularly the Royal Parks, to encourage birds. Although one or two have been used by owls, the majority have been used by grey squirrels. It is important where boxes are provided, that they are cleaned out no later than January each year.

5. BENEFITS OF LBAP

By maintaining a population of trees suitable for nesting and roosting owls, it is likely that other species will also benefit, for example woodpeckers, noctule bat and the beetles *Mycetophagus piceus* and *Eledona agricola*, both Red Data Book species recorded amongst fungi on old oaks in Westminster. Old oaks are also important for the purple hairstreak butterfly which is likely to be breeding in the Royal Parks in Westminster. Managing habitats in Westminster to increase levels of prey populations, for example woodmice, could also produce other benefits in terms of wildflowers, grasses and invertebrates in grassland and woodland edge.

As the top carnivore, a thriving owl population is an indicator of reasonably healthy food-webs, and is useful as an indicator of biodiversity. For this reason, the tawny owl has considerable value as a 'flagship' species, raising awareness of biodiversity conservation amongst people. Owls in the city will be of benefit to residents and those who visit Westminster in that it will give many an opportunity to hear and see these birds, where they otherwise may not. In addition, tawny owls may play some role in helping to control pest populations of pigeons, rats and mice.

6. UK BIODIVERSITY OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS

The tawny owl is included on the UK Biodiversity Steering Group's list of priority species. No action plan has been published at present. It will not have a London-wide Action Plan or Species statement.

This plan links with the Westminster Habitat Action Plans for Parkland and Small Parks and Garden Squares.

**For further information on this Action Plan, please contact
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