

A Key to Species Using Barn Owl Nest Boxes, Species Easily Confused with Barn Owls, and Signs of Barn Owl Presence



Ontario Barn Owl Recovery Project

P.O. Box 805 Simcoe, ON N3Y 4T2

1-888-448-BIRD (2473)

barnowl@bsc-eoc.org

www.bsc-eoc.org/barnowl.html

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European Starling

This aggressive opportunist will nest just about anywhere, including rural mailboxes, barns, and nest boxes for other bird species where the entrance hole is larger than 4 cm (1½"). Nest consists of grasses, stems, dried leaves, corn husks, feathers and cloth.



American Kestrel

This colourful and common grasslands falcon will readily nest in Barn Owl nest boxes. Kestrels are often seen perching on telephone wires or hovering over prey in fields. This species benefits from having a layer of pea gravel placed in nest boxes to prevent their eggs from rolling around, an activity that should be performed in late winter before nesting takes place.



Rock Dove (Pigeon)

Common throughout southern Ontario, this species will use Barn Owl nest boxes for nesting. Nest structures are sloppy assortments of debris, mud and grass stalks. Nests are readily abandoned when Kestrels or Barn Owls decide to move in.



Short-eared Owl

This is a ground nesting species seen in fields and on fence posts in the Haldimand area, often in daytime. Easily confused with Barn Owls (similar size and ear tufts not readily visible), the distinguishing features are yellow eyes and darker face and breast.



Screech Owl

This small owl (22cm) will roost (shelter) during the winter months, as well as nest in Barn Owl nest boxes. It is distinguishable from Barn Owls by its smaller size, yellow eyes, presence of ear tufts, and the pellets are much smaller than those of Barn Owls. Calls include wavering whistles and trills.



Barn Owl

The Barn Owl is an endangered species in eastern Canada. This nocturnal species feeds almost exclusively on voles and field mice and is therefore often associated with farm structures. It requires extensive fields and grasslands for hunting. Identifying features include its dark eyes, lack of ear tufts, heart-shaped face and size (averaging 40 cm or 16”).



Great-horned Owl

The largest of our southern owls, this species is not easily confused with Barn Owls due to its much larger size and prominent ear tufts. Call is deep hooting most commonly heard from woodlots in late winter and early spring. They nest in old Crow or Red-tailed Hawk nests. This amazing predator’s prey includes rabbits, skunks, grouse and ... Barn Owls!



Ghostly Flyer

Seeing a Barn Owl in-flight for the first time is an awesome and inspiring experience. Looking like a giant, pale moth it glides across open fields searching for its rodent prey. Specially designed flight feathers ensure silent flight, allowing Barn Owls to capture prey without warning.



Barn Owl Pellets

Like other birds of prey, Barn Owls “cough up” pellets consisting of bundles of fur and bones of its prey (which are usually swallowed whole). Their pellets may be found outside nest box entrances and under roosting sites. Experts are able to identify the species which produced the pellets by their appearance and composition.

Barn Owls and Barns

A cavity nester, this species readily nests in farm structures—including haylofts, on barn beams, in corn cribs and in specially designed nest boxes. The Ontario Barn Owl Recovery Project committee has helped erect over 325 nest boxes across Haldimand, Norfolk, Niagara, Elgin and Essex-Kent. Maybe some day in the near future you will be lucky enough to see a pair of Barn Owls like these in your barn!



Signs of Barn Owl Presence

Along with pellets, other indications of Barn Owl presence are “white wash” (or droppings) and feathers on barn floors. If you find evidence of what you think might be Barn Owls in your barn please contact us at the information above.