

# Mid-Cheshire Barn Owl Conservation Group

[incorporating North, North East, East and South Cheshire]

## Newsletter

Issue No 47 - December 2016



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### Chairman's Chat

Firstly, may I wish you all a Very Merry Christmas and a Prosperous New Year [hopefully this Newsletter reaches you before Christmas Day].

It's been a long year, but also a successful year.

It's been a long year because, after a relatively slow start, we were still finding and ringing chicks in November [see photograph below].

It's also been a successful year [for our Group anyway] because we've had 91 recorded breeding pairs with 192 chicks identified, of which 122 were ringed. That represents a 62% increase in breeding pairs and an 86% increase in chicks on last year's numbers.

Colin Shawyer, a national expert on barn owls, reckons that 2017 should be a very good year for voles and shrews. Perhaps 2017 may be even better than 2016. But let's not count our chickens [or chicks] just yet, and just celebrate a really good 2016. Mother Nature will no doubt dictate just what 2017 will bring.

I'm not going to say a great deal more in this opening 'Chat' as the rest of the Newsletter concentrates on two of the aspects of barn owls I referred to in the last Newsletter [how to identify the sex of a barn owl and how to assess the age of a barn owl], which I hope you will find interesting.

But I would like to conclude by thanking everyone for their support during the year, particularly those who have helped monitor and check our boxes. It's only by the hard work of all of you [you know who you are] that enables us to continue to support and conserve the barn owls of Cheshire.



A chick ringed on the 6 November 2016 – may it survive the harshness our winter weather and continue to increase the barn owl population of Cheshire next year.

I will conclude with my usual appeal – if you are fortunate enough to see any signs of [or hear] barn owls please can you let us know [email [cheshirebarnowls@gmail.com](mailto:cheshirebarnowls@gmail.com) or our website [www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk](http://www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk) or phone 01606-75937 or 07970-235473].

John Mycock  
[Chairman]

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## How To Identify the Sex of a Barn Owl?

It's almost impossible to identify whether a barn owl is male or female when its flying overhead, the characteristics are so difficult to separate unless the birds are relatively close.

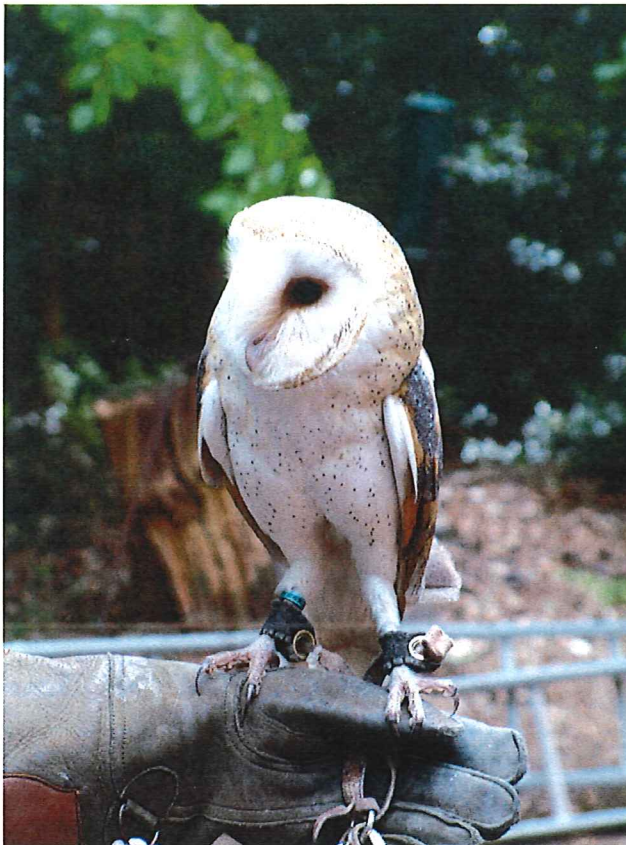
So what are the different characteristics?

Please note that the following are the general differences, unfortunately some birds fail to follow the 'rules' so to speak.

Females often have darker brown feathers around the rim of the facial disc as well as darker bars on the tale.

Females also have small black spots or flecking on the chest feathers and on the underside of the wings.

Males on the other hand are generally lighter in colour and almost pure white on the chest feathers and under the wings.



Female with flecking on chest



Male with pure white chest

The differences are a little easier to spot when you have the two sexes together. Females appear slightly more stocky [and slightly heavier in weight] with the darker feathers and facial disc being more prominent compared to the lighter coloured male.

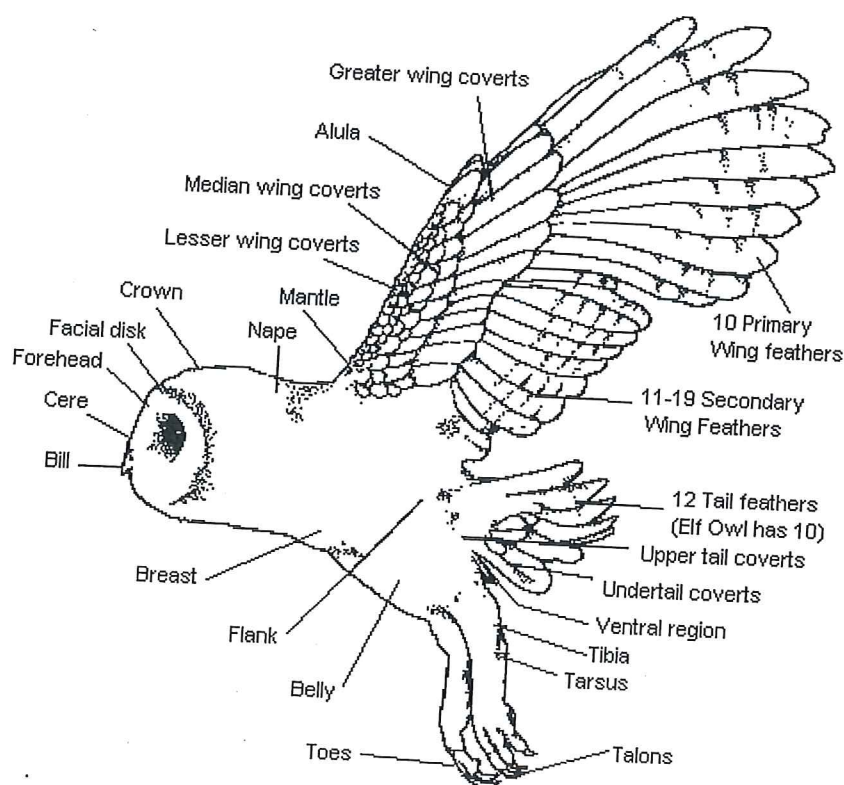
Determining the sex of chicks when in your hand can be done with some degree of certainty from around the age of 24 days or older, even before the primary feathers have had chance to unfurl. This can be done by checking for spotting on the unfurled tips of the white underwing covert feathers – it is these feathers which show the wing flecking in adult females. But, of course, it becomes easier and more certain as the chicks get older.

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## How to Assess the Age of a Barn Owl

So how do we assess the age of a barn owl? Well, it's all in the feathers so to speak – their rate of growth and rate of renewal.

It has to be said firstly that the following information, and resulting ability to assess the age of a barn owl, has only come about after extensive investigations and monitoring of barn owls, both chicks and adults, by dedicated barn owl enthusiasts, over very lengthy periods of time. Many thanks to these people.





So let's start with chicks.










As you can imagine, barn owl chicks are not born with feathers as we like to think of them, the feathers develop and grow over time. They start off with a simple quill, no feathers. The tips of these quills then develop 'pins' which slowly, over time, grow and unfurl into the more recognisable feather 'vane'.

Remarkably, what has been found is that the time taken for the above growing process is very consistent for all barn owl chicks – to the point where it is sufficiently accurate to assess the age of a barn owl chick to within +/- 1 day from the age of 13 to 56 days and within +/- 1.5 days from the age of 57 to 67 days, after which the growth of the feather is complete.

A table has been produced [not included in this Newsletter] detailing the length of the pin [relevant for an age between 13 to 24 days] and the feather [relevant for an age between 25 to 67 days] with instructions where and how to measure the respective lengths. However, these measurements do not relate to just any of the feathers, they are specific to what is referred to as P7 or the 7<sup>th</sup> primary wing feather. As the sketch above shows, there are 10 primary wing feathers. The 7<sup>th</sup> was selected as it is one of the three longest primaries and has been shown to be one of the fastest growing in juvenile birds.



It is possible to assess the age of a chick by its size and development – see the details from the Barn Owl Trust below. However, this is not as accurate as the above feather measurement process.

| A guide to ageing young Barn Owls   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <b>Day 14</b><br>WL = 55mm<br>Weight = 167g<br>  | <b>Day 21</b><br>WL = 92mm<br>Weight = 239g<br>  | <b>Day 28</b><br>WL = 127mm<br>Weight = 330g<br> |
| <b>Day 35</b><br>WL = 171mm<br>Weight = 385g<br> | <b>Day 42</b><br>WL = 204mm<br>Weight = 374g<br> | <b>Day 49</b><br>WL = 232mm<br>Weight = 391g<br> |
| <b>Day 56</b><br>WL = 260mm<br>Weight = 387g<br> | <b>Day 63</b><br>WL = 276mm<br>Weight = 346g<br> |    |

Now for aging adult barn owls.

Assessing the age of an adult barn owl relies upon the fact that they shed, or moult, their flight feathers in a particular sequence throughout their second, third and fourth years of life [unfortunately we don't come across many birds much older than this in the wild].

Consequently, by spreading out the wing feathers and viewing the under surface it is possible to determine which feathers were replaced at the last moult.

Young adult birds usually show a uniform silvery-whiteness and sheen to all primary feathers.

A bird between a year or two old will usually have a new glossy white P6 primary feather amongst slightly duller and greyer ones.

A bird around 2 years old will usually exhibit clean and glossy P4, P5, P7 and P8 [and occasionally P9] primary feathers.

A bird 3 years old often shows glossy P1, P2, P3 and P10 primary feathers.

Unfortunately, thereafter, 4, 5 and 6 year old birds can show the same feather details as a 2 or 3 year old bird – so not very safe or accurate to age a bird much after 3 years old. However, this is where the ringing of birds comes into its own – if the bird has been ringed we have very accurate details of its true age.

The above is how we now age the various barn owls, chicks and adults, we come across.



A beautiful full set of wing feathers

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## And Finally

If anyone has any comments or queries on the above matters or anything they would like to contribute to future Newsletters [articles, letters, comments, concerns, questions, etc] please contact John Mycock on 07970-235473 or 01606-75937 or [cheshirebarnowls@gmail.com](mailto:cheshirebarnowls@gmail.com) or [www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk](http://www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk)