

## Barn Owl Facts

- Barn owls do not hoot - they screech, hiss and scream
- Barn owls in Belize have a 4-foot wing span but weigh less than a pound
- Life is hard for a barn owl: 75% of chicks will die within 12 months and wild adults only live for around 2-3 years, even though in captivity they can reach up to 25 years
- Barn owls mate for life
- A family of 2 adults and 6 young may consume over 1,000 rodents during the 3-month nesting period
- Barn owls can hunt in total darkness, using just their ears to locate prey. His hearing is so good it can hear the heartbeat of a mouse from 10 feet away
- To protect his hearing, his ears are covered with feathered flaps that close for loud noises and open for soft sounds
- His eyes are fixed in their sockets, so he must turn his entire head in order to look around
- The barn owl is completely silent in flight. He has super-long legs to reach right into the grass where mice use hidden runways to move around.
- Farmers in Europe put up boxes to encourage barn owls: crops are safe from rats with these hunters around
- In Mesoamerican cultures the barn owl is a symbol of death and destruction but in Indian culture and Greek mythology, the barn owl is companion to a goddess and symbolises prosperity or wisdom.



## How to keep barn owls out of your home

### Step 1: Seal Up Your Roof



When we are called to an owl removal, it's because the birds have nested in the roof space of a home, school or office building. Gaps larger than 4" between the walls and roof can be sealed with wire mesh, foam or wood to keep the owls out. This makes sense since

owls are not the only creature which likes living in roof-spaces and attics: possum, rats, snakes, bats to name but a few would happily make their home there too.

### Step 2: Encourage nesting elsewhere



Barn owls are good to have around because they keep rat populations under control. Construct a very simple box and mount it onto a tree or post or the side of an out-building. The box needs to be waterproof, with a hole or slot for entry, and a flat surface inside.

Your owls will be comfortable and your yard will be rat-free.

### Report injured, abused or illegally held wildlife

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Contact us if you would like to receive educational talks on the birds of Belize at your school or workplace.



Bird  
Sanctuary &  
Rehabilitation Centre

## All About the Barn Owl



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*Barn owls are protected under the Wildlife Protection Act,  
Chapter 220 of the laws of Belize*

## Meet the Barn Owl



There are 30 different species of barn owl worldwide covering every continent except Antarctica. The Latin name *Tyto alba alba* means 'white owl'. Local names include ghost owl,

monkey-faced owl, and death owl. The Ancient Maya God of the dead, Mictlantecuhtli, was often depicted with a barn owl and many Mesoamerican cultures consider them a symbol of death and destruction. Belize locals say if one passes over your house, someone will die and if a pregnant woman sees one, she will abort. Of course, none of this is true, but as a result of such myths, many birds are killed or injured by fearful humans.

## Where do they live?

Barn owls live and hunt farmlands, pine savannah, towns and cities. Their natural nests are tree hollows and rock crevices but they have adapted beautifully to man-made outbuildings and roof-spaces. Belize City has many barn owls thanks to the abundant food supply and attractive roof spaces in which to nest.

## So, what do they eat?

Urban owls love rats and mice, although rural owls will also take birds, fish, reptiles and insects. Prey is often swallowed whole and indigestible parts such as bones, teeth and fur are regurgitated as a 2-inch long pellet. These pellets can be 6-8 inches deep on



the floor of a barn owl roost. The owl uses this gruesome debris as a cushion for her eggs.

An adult barn owl in Belize City will eat 2-4 rats a night and a healthy pair and their offspring can demolish 10 or 12 a night, or 3000 per year! Imagine the state of our cities if barn owls weren't busy keeping down the rat populations.

## How do they hunt?



Barn owls, like all raptors (birds that hunt in flight) have strong grasping talons for killing prey, and a hooked upper beak for tearing meat. He can hunt in total darkness by using sound to locate prey. His ears are positioned just behind that distinctive heart-shaped ridge, and one ear is higher than the other so he can locate sound from above and below, as well as from the side. A barn owl can hear peeps, rustles or even heartbeats from many feet away. They swoop from a perch or fly very close to the ground and dive onto their prey with long legs and talons extended. They are totally silent in flight which makes them effective hunters and adds to their eerie reputation.

## What about reproduction?

Barn owls mate for life. They start to breed at around 10-12 months. Because they have a short lifespan in the wild (approximately 2 years) they breed only once or twice in their lives, often using the same nest site. They are not very territorial and it's common in Belize City to see several pairs using the same roof space. They lay their eggs on a flat surface in a dark space and surround them with their pellets.



The female lays an average of 4-6 eggs every 2-3 days. She starts incubating as soon as the first one is laid, and after 30-34 days, the eggs begin to hatch in the same order as they were laid, so there can be 2-3 weeks difference in age and size between the youngest and oldest chicks. When food is scarce, the older and stronger owlets have a better chance of survival, and they may even trample or eat their younger siblings.



The fluffy white hatchlings make hissing, rasping screams and clicking sounds from sunset to sunrise, which is very disconcerting for homeowners: many claim they have the 'devil living in their roof'.

The babies are fed by both adults for 10 weeks until they begin to fly. They stay in the area of the nest site until they are 3 - 5 months old. Once they have left, the adults may then lay a second clutch of eggs. Depending on food availability, they can produce up to 3 broods in a year.

## What are the threats to a barn owls' survival?

Racoons, possums and dogs can kill the young owls and the great-horned owl is a predator of the adult barn owl. But, as with most birds, their biggest threat is man.

Owls can become entangled on barbed wire and power lines when hunting. The use of pesticides and poisons by farmers and home owners kills off their food supply and often poisons the owl itself.



A lack of nest sites limits the reproductive ability of the birds: with better construction techniques, there are less roof spaces available to the owls and many owls that do find nest sites are disturbed or killed by humans.