

Celebrating success

Wildlife conservation is not easy, so we should take time to celebrate our successes. In the UK, birds of prey are one of our best success stories.

Buzzards, our most common bird of prey, increased by 76% from 1995 to 2024 and a red kites numbers skyrocketed by over 2,464% between 1995 and 2023!

You'd be unlucky not to see both these birds if you walked around Clifford and the surrounding fields. In the case of red kites, they were absent from the area until about 10 years ago.

Most other birds of prey have also increased, except the kestrel, which is easily recognised by its ability to hover. Kestrels declined nationally by 37% between 1995 and 2023 – for reasons not known. However, even

kestrels appear to be doing well and are a common site around Clifford compared to a few years ago.

You've also a fair chance of seeing a sparrowhawk in or flying over your garden

garden and a pair of barn owls are regularly seen hunting across the regenerative farming fields towards

Ailstone before dark. Most of these birds of prey have thrived from a combination of pesticides bans, legal protection, targeted introductions (e.g. red kites) and the provision of nesting boxes.

But it's still not all plain sailing and the barn owl story overleaf shows how fragile it can be being an apex predator.

and there are a number of reports of seeing a hobby nearby.

Perhaps the most exciting of all is the continued sight and sound of tawny and barn owls in and around Clifford. Three tawny owl chicks have been spotted in a tree in a large



The barn owl story...

Over time the natural cavities in mature trees and old farm buildings used by nesting barn owls have significantly declined and man-made boxes are now essential for sustaining the country's breeding population. According to the Game and Wildlife conservation trust, over 80% of the UK's barn owl population now relies on these artificial nest boxes to breed and survive. There are at least 3 barn owl boxes around Clifford and some have definitely been used for breeding in the past, although it's not clear where the current pair of birds are nesting.

The next limiting factor for barn owls is availability of food. Barn owls mainly eat small mammals, particularly voles, and small mammal numbers vary dramatically from

year to year depending on the weather. Barn owl breeding success goes hand in hand with small mammal prey numbers such that in 'good' small mammal years, large broods of six or more owl chicks can be raised, but in 'bad' small mammal years just one or two chicks may survive.

As a result, it is estimated that barn owl numbers in the UK vary from year to year from c4,000- 12,000 breeding pairs. According to the Barn owl trust, 2022-2024 were good barn owl years whereas 2025 was a disaster. Such low numbers and such variability highlight how lucky we are to usually have at least one pair locally. And with the regenerative farming initiative at Alscot, there should be a much larger

population of small mammals available around Clifford (they have regularly been seen hunting over these fields), even if the weather is not ideal. So, let's hope we have our barn owls for a long time to come and we shall be looking at other suitable sites for new barn owl nesting boxes.

Meanwhile, let's reflect on this success story and thank the many determined individuals around the country that have made it happen...

