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Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*

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During the breeding season, the adult male will remain close to the nest to protect it.

1.0 Introduction

The tawny owl has a mottled brown plumage, a heart-shaped facial disc and dark-brown eyes. Both sexes look alike. They do not build nests, but normally lay their eggs from mid March to May, occupying holes in trees, squirrel dreys and occasionally using old buildings. There are usually between two and four eggs incubated by the female. When hatched, the owlets (young) are fed mainly by the male. Owlets leave the nest before they are able to fly, clambering around amongst the branches.

Tawny owls have several roost sites which they will use at different times of the year. During the breeding season, the adult male will remain close to the nest to protect it. Once breeding is over, the adults will move between their favourite roosts.

This is a bird of woodland and well-wooded parks, squares and large gardens. Like most owls it hunts predominately at night and roosts by day, though there are times when rearing young and food is scarce that it will hunt during the day. Prey includes small mammals, especially mice, young rats and shrews, some birds and occasionally fish, frogs, molluscs, worms and insects.

2.0 Current status

The tawny owl is the most common owl over much of Britain, although absent in Ireland. It is considered a

common breeding resident in London that has become well adapted to living in the inner London boroughs.

In Westminster it is the most frequently recorded owl, although numbers have declined in recent years. During the last two years, there have been positive records for just two breeding pairs: the first in Leafyard Wood, The Regent's Park; the second in Kensington Gardens. Winters have tended to be mild with very few nights with hard frosts, which seems to be the reason why those in The Regent's Park have bred at either the end of the year, or during January and February.

Since 2000, tawny owls have been seen and/or heard calling in The Regent's Park, Hyde Park, St James's Park, Buckingham Palace Gardens, Clifton Gardens and Paddington Green.

3.0 Factors affecting the species

The loss of green space to development has a negative impact on biodiversity. Tall, mature, evergreen trees that are well covered in ivy are attractive sites for nesting and roosting tawny owl. Their removal - be it as a result of development or tree management - can lead to a decline in suitable breeding habitat. A reduction in grassland, woodland and scrub habitat will in turn lead to the demise of tawny-owl foraging sites. Combined, these factors have a considerable impact on the range and distribution of the species.

The toxins, poisons and chemicals used to control



pests in land management do accumulate in their predators. When tawny owl feed on rats and mice for example, toxins in these small mammals will build up over time contributing to the owl's early death and/or breeding failure.

This owl is also at risk of predation. Owlets are particularly vulnerable when they have left their nest but cannot yet fly. If found by crows or ring-necked parakeets they can be attacked and driven down on to

the ground and sometimes killed, by crows, foxes, dogs or cats. People and their dogs can also disturb owlets when they are on the ground.

4.0 Current action

Throughout Westminster, action is being taken to monitor tawny owl numbers and effort is being made to protect known breeding pairs.

Nest boxes are sited across The Regent's Park, Kensington Gardens, Hyde Park, St James's Park, St John's Wood Church Grounds and Grosvenor Gardens in an effort to encourage breeding.

A meadow at The Regent's Park; tall grassland in Hyde Park Meadow, at the lakeside in St James's Park and in areas of Kensington Gardens and The Green Park all provide foraging habitat for tawny owl. So too do the deep flowerbeds, shrubberies and tall grass areas left in Grosvenor Gardens and at St John's Wood Church Grounds.

5.0 Action Plan Aims

- Audit and monitor the tawny owl population.
- Promote understanding and awareness of tawny owl.
- Protect tawny owl and increase species range through habitat management.

6.0 Links with other Action Plans and Strategies

- Westminster Habitat Action Plans for Churchyards and Cemeteries; Parks and Green Spaces; Private Gardens; Veteran Trees and Decaying Wood.
- London Habitat Action Plans for Churchyards and Cemeteries; Parks and Green Spaces; Private Gardens; Woodland.

7.0 Lead partner organisation and working group members

The lead partner for this Plan is Westminster City Council (WCC).

Working group members include Central Royal Parks Wildlife Group (CRPWG); Grosvenor Estates Ltd (GE); The Royal Parks (TRP); The Thorney Island Society (TIS).

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action plan: Tawny Owl, *Strix aluco*

NB For a full list of acronyms see page 64 of the 'Westminster Biodiversity Action Plan'.

Target 1: To audit and monitor the tawny owl population in Westminster initially by 2008.

Action number	Action	Lead partner	Contributing partners	Start date	End date	Cost
1	Disseminate GiGL recording form to all gardeners, tree and park contractors and land managers.	WCC	GE, TRP	04/07	07/07	-
2	Send tawny owl records to GiGL.	WCC	GE, TRP	04/07	Ongoing	-
3	Review progress on action plan annually using the UK Biodiversity Action Reporting System (BARS).	WCC	GE, TRP, TIS	06/08	08/08	-

Target 2: To promote understanding and awareness of tawny owl.

Action number	Action	Lead partner	Contributing partners	Start date	End date	Cost
4	Design and print a flyer with recommendations on how to manage sites for tawny owl. Distribute to parks and green-space managers and private-square owners.	WCC	GE, TRP, TIS	04/07	03/08	£500
5	Update tawny owl leaflet for distribution to schools and the general public.	WCC	GE, TRP, TIS	04/07	03/08	£500

Target 3: To protect tawny owl and increase species range through habitat management: achieve a 50% increase in breeding tawny owl numbers by 2010.

Action number	Action	Lead partner	Contributing partners	Start date	End date	Cost
6	Disseminate recommendations on tawny-owl management to parks and green space managers and invite a commitment to action.	WCC	GE, TRP	04/07	03/08	-
7	Implement park and green-space management objectives for tawny-owl conservation.	WCC	GE, TRP	04/08	03/09	-