

Night of the owlets – an incredible wildlife encounter you'll never forget



Paul Brackley

visits Kevin Robson's hide in Fen Drayton for an incredible experience.

We've barely taken our seats inside the pop-up hides when we hear them calling.

It's a sound that will strike a chord with parents of young children everywhere because, roughly translated, it means: 'Feed me'.

And it's not long before the mother obliges.

She swoops in, silently and majestically, aware that a little something to help meet the incessant demand of her young is available.

She's just metres away – it's a rare and privileged view – and we rattle off some photographs before she flies the short distance to the tree to our left where her owlets impatiently wait.

It's tempting to check the back of the camera screen to see if we've captured the action, but there's no time, because she's back – looking for more food.

And this is just the start of an incredible experience at Kevin Robson's tawny owl hides on private land in Fen Drayton.

The beautiful female tawny visits repeatedly – perhaps 25 times or more – over the course of a couple of hours as she seeks out food.

The views are incredible, as they were when I first visited last year. This time around, I'm also hoping for a glimpse of the owlets.

Like most people, I've never seen a tawny owl. That soon changes as one fluffy chick flies down to be near its mum. It's an incredible sight – the tawny mother on one branch and one of her four owlets on another above.

Before long, the owl flies back to be with its siblings in a tree, and briefly I get a glimpse of three of them in the tree. It's out of reach of the LED lighting that Kevin has carefully assembled to illuminate the area in front of the hides, but their outline is unmistakable – and so is the noise as they continue to call for food.

It's clearly a busy time for the mother, with four hungry mouths to feed, but they seem to be doing exceptionally well. The father, in case you're wondering, has been seen briefly by some of those visiting the hide this year, but is much less involved in feeding the young.

After a couple of wonderful hours in the company of this tawny family, it's time to pack up our tripods, clamber out of the hides, switch off the LED lights and head for home, leaving the tawny mother to hunt naturally for more food – perhaps a vole or a mouse – in the South



A tawny owl, above, seen during our visit to the hide and its mother



Pictures: Paul and Jack Brackley, unless stated



The four tawny owlets together

Picture: Kevin Robson



Cambridgeshire countryside.

A few nights later, Kevin lets me know that the incredible sight of all four owlets in the branches in front of the hides was enjoyed by visitors. It's a veritable Parliament.

Kevin first began observing these owls on land belonging to his in-laws in late 2020. He opened the hide experience in 2021, although the owls did not breed successfully in that season.

Tawnies, however, form a bond for life and the pair returned in 2022, nested on site and successfully raised three owlets.

In 2023, the same pair of owls nested a few hundred yards off-site but continued to visit the area reliably, encouraged by the little food that Kevin puts out to help them supplement what they catch naturally.

That year, their two owlets fledged and the female brought her chicks over to the hide area to roost.

The reliable presence of the owls is not only a wonderful way to enable visitors to enjoy these incredible birds, but also to gain rare insight into their nocturnal lives.

Kevin tells me: "A friend of mine is very keen on wildlife conservation and has a particular interest in owls. In the autumn of 2023 we decided to put up an additional nest box – I now have three tawny boxes on site – and also improve the CCTV coverage of the area.

"The CCTV always takes a

battering from the elements and sometimes from rodents who can't help themselves nibbling through the cables!

"I now have six CCTV cameras constantly watching and recording the area and more recently a seventh camera which links to my phone. The combination of all of this footage has given a brilliant insight into the behaviour of the owls."

In January, the female began to roost in the area and immediately chose the new nest box. Her partner quickly also took up residency, often roosting in one of the neighbouring boxes. "Soon there were signs of courtship and affection – after a few weeks they were roosting together in the new nest box and would spend hours preening one another," says Kevin.

Most tawnies lay a clutch of two to three eggs and the species only have one brood per year.

It was on March 12 this year that the female laid the first egg, with a second on March 15, third on March 17 and a fourth and final egg on March 20.

"Laying the eggs at intervals results in asynchronous hatching – a strategy that is common in owls and one which increases the survival of at least some chicks if feeding conditions prove challenging," explains Kevin.

"The cameras showed that the female became more diligent about incubation after the third egg was

laid. Prior to this she would incubate through the day but would frequently vacate the nest at night, sometimes for hours at a time.

"After the third egg was laid her behaviour changed and she would only vacate the nest for a few minutes each night.

"At one point she did not leave the nest for over 72 hours. During the incubation the male would visit the nest and bring in food – although not as often as I anticipated.

"Most nights he would bring in one or two voles, but some nights he did not visit at all and the female would not feed.

"I assume that during this time she needed less food because of her inactivity. Although the male did not help with incubation, he would sometimes roost with the female inside the box and would also spend hours at the entrance 'on guard'.

"On occasion, he would roost in one of the nearby boxes instead, but always within easy distance of his mate and her precious eggs.

"Although the textbooks say that tawny eggs hatch after 30 days, the first egg this year did not hatch until 33 days.

"All four eggs hatched successfully over a period of four days – so the final egg 'caught up' the first by a period of four days. I'm not sure if this is common, or as a result of the incubation behaviour.

and her four owlets in the box, but five days after the final hatching she chased the male away from the box.

"He still plays a part in the feeding of the owlets but most of this work is now done by the female, who devotes her time to the caring and feeding of the youngsters."

It was four weeks after hatching that the first owl appeared on the edge of the box and a day later it was joined by one of its siblings. The owlets branched out from the nest at intervals from four days later.

"Each year the female, and to a lesser extent the male, will care for the owlets for several months, but eventually the adults will drive the youngsters out of their territory and the juveniles must then establish an area for themselves, or find a territory which has a gap," explains Kevin.

"Now that I have observed this behaviour I am convinced the trigger for this event is not necessarily just their age but is also linked to the independence and maturity shown by the individual owlets. Although this part of the process sounds harsh, it is a perfectly natural behaviour and one that is repeated by many species of wildlife.

"The youngsters are likely to establish a territory very close to where they hatched – tawnies tend not to move far from 'home' through their entire lives."

They generally have a territory of about 30 to 50 acres – which is

roughly the size of 15-25 football pitches.

It's little wonder that the tawny hide has become extremely popular with photographers and nature lovers, for it offers an unparalleled view.

"Each year the number of visitors to the tawny hide has increased, year-on-year, by about 50 per cent," says Kevin.

"This year promises to be the busiest yet, with over 100 bookings. The owls have been remarkably reliable – there has still only been one evening, back in 2021, where visitors didn't see a tawny owl."

In addition to tawny owls, you may also spot the occasional mammal visiting the area. We briefly see a muntjac, and last year we saw a badger, although the wetter conditions this year has meant they have been feeding elsewhere this time around.

Photographers will need a tripod – you are photographing after sunset, in limited light, so you'll be using very low shutter speeds.

And in addition to memory cards packed with amazing images, you're sure to leave with wonderful memories of time spent in the presence of a magnificent bird.

■ To book, visit khrimages.co.uk. There are only a few slots available this season. For 2025, places will cost £90 for one photographer, or £160 (£80 each) for two photographers coming together.

