

Culture

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Owls that!

We enjoy an incredible nighttime wildlife experience in South Cambridgeshire

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The male tawny. Below, a parent feeds one of the owlets as another looks on

Enjoy a glimpse into nocturnal world of tawny owls

Editor **Paul Brackley** returns to a very special hide to catch up with the lives of these stunning birds.

Most people have never seen a tawny owl, even though they are the most common of the British owls and their tu-whit tu-whoo sounds are familiar enough to have entered into folklore. So to witness five tawny owls – two adults and three owlets – at close quarters on one night is an extraordinary spectacle and a privilege. It unfolds on the edge of a private woodland in South Cambridgeshire where Kevin Robson runs a night-time tawny owl experience from pop-up hides. This is my third visit and each occasion has been magical – and thrown up something different. “I first started observing these owls in late 2020 and, with the help of a friend, got a nest box put up at the end of that year,” recalls Kevin. “The owls did not breed successfully in the first season but activity was such that I was able to open a hide for visiting photographers and wildlife enthusiasts. The venture has grown over the years and I now have three nest boxes in the area and eight CCTV cameras, which monitor the site 24/7. These give a fascinating insight into the owls’ behaviour. “Each year since 2021 the owls have bred successfully and we have now seen 13 owlets fledge in total.” This year, four owlets have successfully hatched and fledged. As I take my seat in the pop-up hide at about 9pm, with the last vestiges of daylight filtering out of the sky through the trees, I have my fingers crossed that I would see one. Or rather, I have my finger on the shutter button of my camera, which is perched atop a sturdy tripod aimed towards the perches that Kevin has set up in front of the four pop-up hides. He takes his place in one of them after putting out some food for the owls – enough to bring them in but only as a handy supplement to their natural hunting. From arrival, we could hear the hungry chicks calling, and glimpsed the adults as they flashed through the tree canopy. And it takes no time at all for them to come down in search of some food. Sure enough, an owlet is one of the first to appear, taking its place on a branch and calling to its parents. In previous years, it has always been the busy mother that has looked after all the feeding. This year, we are fortunate to witness both parents. “2025 has seen the arrival of a new male in the territory,” explains Kevin. “His behaviour and vocal



A tawny owl considers which way to go. Right, from top, one of the

parents and two of the owlets viewed from Kevin Robson’s tawny hide in South Cambridgeshire

repertoire are notably different to the previous male. He is much more ‘musical’ in his vocals. The previous male sounded a little bit like a strangled cockerel – and the new male has taken a much bigger role in raising the chicks. “In all previous years the care of the owlets has been solely down to the female bird, but this year the male has played a full role and he helps with both feeding and protecting the youngsters. This has been fascinating to watch – seeing the interactions between the adult birds and also with the owlets.” It has to be said, though, that during the course of the evening, it is clear the male is making sure he feeds himself as well as his chicks! The mother, on the other hand, seems almost entirely focused on the owlets. Typical, you might say... Both the male and the female are a sight to behold. Majestic birds, silent in flight, they perch just a matter of metres away from us. Kevin has carefully but not harshly illuminated the area in front of us with white LED lighting. This is very effective but, of course, this is taking place at night, so you’ll need slow shutter speeds (around 1/30-1/50 is a good starting point) and a sturdy tripod for good photographs. You won’t be short of opportunities. Kevin tells me one photographer rattled off 5,000 images

in one session... As two tawny owlets come together on a branch in one irresistible scene, I’m glad that I’ve got a high capacity memory card. But you could certainly just come to watch. This is a unique nocturnal insight into the life of birds we so rarely see. Most of us will have heard tu-whit tu-whoo at some point – which is actually the ke-wick call of a female and the hoo hoo response of the male – but to see them in front of you, interacting, calling and feeding is a remarkable wildlife experience. And Kevin is helping them to thrive – sometimes in unexpected ways. “One of the owlets had a very lucky escape this year,” he says. “One of my cameras monitors the nest and links to my phone. By chance I happened to be watching live when the eldest chick decided to venture out of the box and into the nearby trees. This is called ‘branching’ and is common to all owls as they cannot fly when they first leave the nest. “Instead, they can hop and jump from branch to branch, until gradually their wings become strong enough to make short flights. This early adventurer had been out of the nest for only a few minutes and made a series of successful hops before she/he took one leap too far and plunged from the tree to the ground.

parents and two of the owlets viewed from Kevin Robson’s tawny hide in South Cambridgeshire

“Without intervention the young owl would certainly have been predated – at this early stage they are unable to fly back up to the trees and are vulnerable to predators such as foxes and corvids. “My wife and I immediately went to the nest site and thankfully found the youngster on the ground. We managed to get him into a cardboard box and my wife – who is better with heights than me – climbed a ladder and popped him back safely in the nest. “It would be fascinating to know if the owl or the adult birds had any concept of what had just happened. Obviously there is no way of knowing, but the adults could certainly sense the danger as one flew out of the trees immediately after the youngster fell to the ground and the female was calling from the trees while we made the ‘rescue’.” Kevin is also gathering interesting data and knowledge on the species. This year, for example, he knows

the adults’ courtship began as early as September last year but nesting did not begin until the final week of February – more than a month later than the previous year. “Despite this, the female actually laid her first egg eight days earlier than 2024,” he says. “Most tawnies lay a clutch of two to three eggs and the species only have one brood per year.” The female laid her first egg this year on 4 March, with a second following on the 7th, a third on the 11th and a fourth and final egg on the 14th. “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. “Although the textbooks say that tawny eggs hatch after 30 days, the first egg this year did not hatch until 34 days – it was 33 days last year. “All four eggs hatched



Pictures: Paul Brackley

successfully over a period of five days, so the second and subsequent eggs ‘caught up’ slightly with the first egg. “This is the second year running we have been able to observe this behaviour because of a camera inside the nest.” The difference between the chicks’ age is visible. During our encounter, which lasted nearly two hours, we saw three of the four chicks and the other could be heard. “Each year the adults 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. “Tawnies generally have a territory of 30 to 50 acres – roughly

the size of 15 to 25 football pitches.” Kevin runs his hide experience each year for several months. Barring cancellations, he is already booked up for this year, but is taking bookings for next year. “The tawny hide has become extremely popular with photographers and nature lovers. Each year the number of visitors has increased and this season I shall again be welcoming over 100 visitors,” he says. “I love to see the reaction from visitors, who are often completely bowled over by the experience. One gentleman remarked recently that watching the owls was ‘Torvill and Dean at their finest’ and another that it was ‘like *Springwatch*’ – but better as you are there live! “It is certainly a privilege to have such a close view into the world of these wild and beautiful creatures and it is great to be able to share the experience.” There’s no argument about that. If you enjoy watching or photographing wildlife, this is an unmissable experience. ■ For more details and to book, visit khrimages.co.uk. For 2026, an evening session will cost £95 for a solo photographer; £170 (£85 each) for two photographers who book and come together, or £255 (£85 each) for three photographers who book and come together.

From the archives

Historian **Mike Petty** tells us what made headlines in Cambridge in years gone by. Visit mikepetty.org.uk and search for the Fenland History group on Facebook.

June 11, 1982

The new flying craze of microlights has arrived in the county. Taurus Aviation has been set up at Haddenham and with the co-operation of farmers there is a choice of fields from which they can take off and land. A Haverhill firm is selling a US-made microlight for £3,000 including five hour’s free instruction. It can be assembled in 30 minutes and carried on a car roof-rack.

June 12, 1931

It was a very gentle earthquake in Cambridge: in the tranquil night there came a mysterious, slow, oscillatory motion, increasing in intensity. It seemed as if a giant hand had seized the bed and was shaking it. A washstand was overturned at Comberton but houses were rocked at Ely where some of the foundations were heard to crack. At St Ives people sought refuge on Market Hill and could not be induced to return to bed.

June 14, 1963

The firm of J E Hanger of Brooklands Avenue supplies and repairs artificial limbs. For nearly 50 years they have dealt entirely with legs. The firm’s workshop has legs of all shapes, sizes and styles, with or without shoes, socks or stockings. Repainted wooden feet are hung up to dry and a grinder is used for smoothing rough metal surfaces.

June 16, 1904

Cambridge Library committee referred to the recent fire on Peas Hill and the destruction of the adjacent premises. But for the skill of the fire brigade the reading room must have been destroyed and the contents lost. The accumulation of books, pictures and literature could never be replaced. Now the old dilapidated buildings should be cleared away and a more appropriate building erected. Next year they would celebrate the jubilee of the opening of the library and appointing Mr Pink as librarian.

June 17, 1960

Peak’s Furnishers of Fitzroy Street have opened large premises in the new shopping arcade in Bradwell’s Court. The electrical appliances section is well stocked with the leading makes of washing machines and spin-dryers, and demonstrations are a daily event. It also has a number of model kitchens fitted right down to the last detail and attractive displays of bedroom, lounge and dining furniture are displayed in room settings.