

Owls in the UK - the Little Owl

They may be small and stocky but when you see a little owl, their stern, old school headmasterly frown packs quite a punch! They are masters of camouflage, bob up and down when agitated but they also like a bit of gentle bathing in the warm morning sunshine.

Although known as a UK owl, they were actually introduced to the UK in the late 19th century.

Heard but not often seen...

Little owls may be difficult to spot but they are highly vocal with studies showing they have more than 20 different calls.

They are most vocal during their breeding season which can start in March but can be heard all year, throughout the day, and often at dusk.

They are usually identified by a familiar, slightly strange mewing call or by the adult male's hoo-eet call on a summer's evening.

What does a little owl look like?

They are stocky little birds with distinctive yellow eyes, a flattish head and mottled brown and white plumage, which helps them blend in to their surroundings and makes them particularly difficult to see.

But once seen, never forgotten as their stern grimace will stay with you for a long time! And they'll probably bob up and down if you disturb their peace.

If UK owls made up a rugby team, the little owl would definitely be the scrum half!

They have rounded wings, rapid wing beats and fly with a slight bounce.

They are usually between 21-23cm in length, weigh 140-220g - about the weight of a medium-sized apple - and have a 54-58cm wingspan.

When and where are you most likely to see them?

Little owls are highly territorial, sedentary birds. They maintain their territory all year round with males aggressively defending their hunting and nesting sites, particularly through the breeding season.

They are primarily found in rural areas of England, Wales and parts of Scotland.

You are most likely to spot them perched on posts, telegraph poles, rocks or trees on farmland, open woodlands, in parks or orchards.

They can be seen during the day, but their plumage makes for great camouflage,

What do they hunt?

Little owls feed on small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, beetles, invertebrates - especially worms - and small birds.

They tend not to hunt on the wing. Instead, they spot their prey from their perch, and then swoop down to grab it in their sharp talons or beak.

Where do they nest?

Their preferred nesting sites are hollows in trees although they can also set up home in a disused rabbit burrow.

Little owls are monogamous and breed between March or August, the female usually laying between two to five eggs.

Youngsters leave the nest after four to five



weeks and then usually hang around for another two weeks on nearby branches relying on their parents for food before becoming totally independent.

How long do little owls live?

In the wild, the typical lifespan is around four years. Records suggest some have lived up to 16 years.

They are also under threat with records showing a population decline of around 24% between 1995 and 2008.

Why are little owls under pressure?

The exact reasons for the decline are not known but it is likely that a lack of food and suitable nesting sites, and wetter weather may be to blame.

Do they have predators?

They have a wide range of predators including tawny owls, buzzards, peregrine falcons, sparrowhawks, foxes, stoats and weasels. Eggs and chicks are also vulnerable to squirrels, rats and domestic animals.

What can we do to help owls?

Use non-toxic methods - such as traps or

exclusion - to control rodents.

Get involved in nest box or survey projects with approved groups.

Avoid felling trees which might provide nesting sites, especially those with cavities.

Avoid disturbing nesting sites during the breeding season.

Plant broadleaf trees and create rough grassland and ponds.

You can watch nest sites from a safe distance that doesn't disturb the birds.

And finally....

In Greek mythology, the little owl is the sacred bird of Athena, the goddess of wisdom, knowledge, insight and vigilance, hence its scientific name - *Athene noctua*. According to legend, Athena originally had a crow as a companion. But she tired of its mischievousness and switched it for an owl because of its serious nature and dignified silence.