



## **BARN OWLS AT STANFORD RESERVOIR**

Barn Owls were regularly recorded at the Reservoir during the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's. Sightings then became infrequent with just a few single records in 1962, 1971, 1976, 1977, 1984, 1995 plus a corpse was found in 2003.

In 2003 the Stanford Ringing Group set about to improve the situation and this document records progress to date.

### 2003

Having long recognised the suitability of the habitat at the Reservoir for Barn Owls, the ringing group sought permission from Severn Trent Water, the landowners and Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust who manage the habitat, to install two Barn Owl pole boxes at the site. Both parties were in full agreement but the projected cost of installation of £330 per box from the Trust were prohibitive. With no funding agreed, the SRG decided to carry out the installations themselves. Group member, Mel Preston purchased two telegraph poles for £25 each and transported them to site. He also constructed the nest boxes that were to sit on top of the poles.

### 2004

On the 24<sup>th</sup> January 2004 members of the Stanford Ringing Group erected the two telegraph pole-mounted nest boxes. Designated "Pole Box 1" & "Pole Box 2" they were located at each end of the eastern bank of Blowers Lodge Bay – see pictures below.





The boxes initially produced mixed results.

We were very encouraged when an adult Barn Owl was frequently observed hunting over Blower's Lodge Bay and the adjacent field. In addition, the bird was seen in the evenings alongside the nearby disused railtrack in April and May were very encouraging. The discovery of twenty or more regurgitated pellets in Pole Box 1 (also during May), was exciting, positive news. Further sightings of two adults quartering an adjacent field early morning on 12<sup>th</sup> June and, half an hour later, over the rank grass between the pole boxes was further evidence of a possible breeding attempt. Amazingly, we had attracted Barn Owls to the site in a matter of a couple of months!

Unfortunately our hopes were short lived. Having obtained the necessary Schedule 1 licence from English Nature we undertook a routine inspection of Pole Box 1 on the 26<sup>th</sup> June 2004 and were astonished with the discovery of a dead adult, possibly female, complete with a clutch of five eggs which were in fact infertile. The mummified condition of the adult proved too difficult for any diagnosis as to the cause of death (below).



Previously, on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 2004, Kestrels had been seen taking an interest in Pole Box 2 (nearest "The Point"). After an inspection and the previous finding of a clutch of five eggs, three surviving nestling Kestrels were ringed on the 5<sup>th</sup> June. This was the first ever recorded breeding of Kestrels within the Reservoir perimeter. Subsequent observations from members of the public included one of 'two young' perched on the outside of the box on the 12<sup>th</sup> June.

However, a post-breeding inspection of Kestrel nest in Pole Box 2 on 26<sup>th</sup> June resulted in an adult Barn Owl flying out and revealed the grim discovery of two partial carcasses of the near-fledged Kestrel young. A third young dead Kestrel was found at the base of the pole – its ring damaged, presumably by a fox or badger (see picture below). Amazingly, inside the box was a clutch of two Barn Owl eggs!



Major Nigel Lewis of the Hawk and Owl Trust was of the opinion that the adult Barn Owl found dead in Pole Box 1 was probably a female. It is males that set up territory and it is unlikely a replacement male would have come in so quickly. It's far more probable that the female died and the male attracted a replacement into his domain.

One can only speculate that perhaps the Barn Owls and Kestrels clashed over prized nesting and hunting territory.

Sadly, both species lost out that year. A further inspection of the boxes several weeks later revealed three cold and deserted Barn Owl eggs. A lone adult Barn Owl was seen on the 21<sup>st</sup> August 2004 but then not again until the 4<sup>th</sup> December 2004.

Subsequently, there were no reliable sightings of Barn Owls at the Reservoir until April 2007. In the intervening period the Pole nest boxes were used successfully by both Stock Doves in Pole Box 1 (four young and one adult ringed) and Kestrels in Pole Box 2 (four young in 2005). At the end of the 2005 breeding season hornets took up residence in Pole Box 1 and their resulting nest spilled out of the front entrance.

## 2007

Hornets continued to be in residence in Pole Box 1 but on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2007 a routine inspection of Pole Box 2 revealed the presence of Barn Owls when two adults flew from it. There had been no recorded sightings of Barn Owls up to this moment and so the presence of the two adults came as a complete surprise.

On 12<sup>th</sup> May an adult, two newly hatched young and two eggs were in the nest box. On 2<sup>nd</sup> June four downy young, two of which were very small, and an adult were present. On 20<sup>th</sup> June 2007 no adults were seen but three young were ringed. However, there was no trace of the fourth chick – Barn Owl chicks are known to devour their youngest siblings and so we had a fairly good idea what had happened to the fourth chick. Barn Owls had successfully bred at the reservoir for the first time!



Encouragingly, an adult flew from Pole Box 2 on 8th September 2007 where it had been roosting and an adult was seen hunting along the disused railtrack early morning 29<sup>th</sup> September.

### 2008

Late in January 2008, an adult Barn Owl was seen leaving Pole Box 2 and again in April. An inspection of the box on 19<sup>th</sup> July revealed three very young chicks but a ringing inspection on 9<sup>th</sup> August found only one chick present – this was duly ringed and the second recorded breeding of Barn Owls had been achieved.



### 2009 -2010

During these years, Pole Box 1 continues to be occupied by hornets and Pole Box 2 has been used to successfully rear Stock Doves.

There have been no attempts at further breeding of Barn Owls.