



# Barn Owl

## North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



### Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*)

Unlike many owls that let out a hoot call, this mysterious white and gold species sends out an eerie screeching sound. Barn owls get their unique name due in part to their common roosting sites in human structures such as churches, steeples, and, of course, barns. Barn owls are nocturnal birds and hunt at night with their incredible sight and hearing abilities. They can even locate prey extremely effectively by sound alone. They are very difficult to find during daylight hours, as they remain quite hidden. Barn owls are usually spotted while driving through open country at night.

### Description

Barn owls are primarily cinnamon to golden-brown in coloration. They have a heart-shaped face that is white, with golden-brown feathers, creating a line around the face shape. Their undersides are usually white, but occasionally are of a golden color similar to their back sides. Their backs and upper wings are typically a mix of buff and gray. The females often have a more reddish and more heavily spotted chest. They have short tails and long, rounded wings. When hunting, barn owls fly low across open areas such as fields and marshes with deep, silent wingbeats. The only way to really know if an owl in the area is by listening for its high pitched, raspy screeching sound.

### History and Status

For the most part, the species' population numbers have been stable. In recent decades, the numbers in some parts of the barn owls' range have declined, whereas in other areas they have gone up. In some cases, their numbers have suffered due to their low flying nature and human expansion leading to collisions with cars or other human obstructions such as telephone wires. Most of the recent population decline is attributed to habitat loss as land use changes from historical agriculture and open lands to increasingly urban. Learn more at [ncwildlife.org/barn-owl](http://ncwildlife.org/barn-owl).

### Habitats & Habits

Barn owls have a wide array of nesting locations, as long as they are near open or semi-open areas where they can hunt. They nest in cavities, various structures or buildings. They also can be found nesting in woodland areas or within city limits if there is a good open area for them to forage for food, although this is less typical. Barn owls will hunt in these open areas by flying low and looking and listening for small rodents, and then fly down and grab their prey.

*Barn owls swallow their food whole and then regurgitate all the excess matter: skin, bones, etc.*

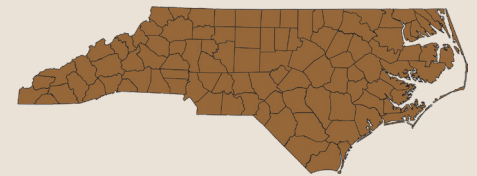


Peter K. Burian

### Range and Distribution

The barn owl is the most widely dispersed of all the owls calling all the continents home except for Antarctica. There are roughly 140,000 found in North America, and 2-9 million found worldwide. Barn owls are year-round residents across North Carolina.

### Range Map



■ Barn Owl Range Map

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## Wildlife Profiles - North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

### Human Interactions

There have been some decreases in some local barn owl populations due in part to human interference such as cars or power lines that can either hurt or even kill low-flying owls. There is, however, a positive coexistence between humans and barn owls: humans have created many new nesting areas for the birds in structures such as barns, churches, abandoned buildings, nest boxes, etc. Barn owls are threatened by urban and suburban development that replaces agricultural land, as well as the loss of hollow trees and old buildings that they use for nesting sites.

If you find an injured owl, contact a [licensed wildlife rehabilitator](#).

### The Wildlife Commission Needs Your Help!

Wildlife Commission biologists are seeking barn owl observations to help them learn more about habitat needs and population distribution of barn owls in the Tar Heel state. Help biologists learn more about barn owls in the Tar Heel state in two ways:

1. If you see a barn owl, let them know. The Barn Owl has a white heart-shaped face and white chest with small brown spots. The back is tawny, marked with black and white spots. Both male and female adults average 12.6 to 15.8 inches in length, weight from 14 to 24 ounces and have a wingspan of 39 to 49 inches. They are silent when flying. Unlike most owls, barn owls do not hoot, but rather make long, harsh screams that last for about two seconds.
2. If you are a property owner with barn owls on or near your property and will allow nest boxes to be placed on your property for free, let them know.

### References/More Information

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#### Credits

Written by Matt Taylor, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (2019)

### Wild Facts

#### Classification

Class: Tytonidae

Order: Strigiformes

#### Average Size

Total Length: 12.6-15.8 in

Wingspread: 39.4-49.2 in

Weight: 14.1-24.7 oz

#### Food

Small rodents such as mice, rats, voles, etc. Occasionally they will prey upon bats, rabbits and other birds.

#### Breeding/Young

Barn owls often mate for life. The male will typically attract a female by doing various display flights and/or by displaying various nesting sites. Barn owls do not build a nest, but rather lay the eggs on piles of pellets and debris. Once mated, the pair will produce 2-18 eggs per clutch (average of 4-8 eggs) depending on conditions. The pair can have 1-3 broods in a year. The female stays with young for 2 weeks after the last chick is hatched then begins hunting along with the male. The fledglings will have their first flight at 55-65 days old. They will stay at the nesting site for a few more weeks before leaving to start their own.

#### Life Expectancy

A barn owl's average life span is about 4 years, but some are known to live longer. Some have lived up to 15 years of age.



Barn owl nestlings (Photo: Allison Medford/NCWRC)