

Nestboxes for use on vertical tree trunks



This leaflet describes how to make and erect a Barn Owl nestbox suitable for erection on a vertical tree trunk. This box design can also be used on the outside wall of a building or on a tall pole, but this is not recommended unless there is no other option available.

The information includes plans, dimensions, materials and safety advice.

Suitability of the area

The Barn Owl is not a woodland bird. It hunts mainly by flying over areas of rough grassland, ditches, hedgerows, young tree plantations etc. that support a high population of small mammals. In areas with an abundance of food but a shortage of suitable sites, nestboxes can be of great benefit. They should always be placed in areas with some good Barn Owl habitat or they are unlikely to be used. For further information, see *Habitat Management* (leaflet no.1).

Most nestboxes for Barn Owls are provided within buildings; see *Nestboxes for use in Bams and other Buildings* (leaflet no.3). However, where a suitable location for an indoor box is not available, outdoor nestboxes are often the next-best option.

Construction

The basic box should be built using rot-resistant or treated sheet material. The Barn Owl Trust uses 9 or 12mm tanalised ($\frac{3}{8}$ "- $\frac{1}{2}$ ") softwood ply, 25 x 50mm (2" x 1") tanalised batten and 30mm ($1\frac{1}{4}$ ") rust resistant screws. Please avoid using hardwood ply, unless it is stamped "FSC Approved". You may use any type of preservative on the box where tanalised ply is not available, but always follow the product instructions and always ensure the box is completely dry before erection. The dimensions are given as a guide, variations of + or - 10% are quite acceptable.

The front of the box should have an access panel to enable nest debris to be cleared out periodically. Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, it is an offence to disturb breeding Barn Owls so nestboxes should only be cleaned out between November and January. The top of the box should be covered with heavy duty roofing felt and it is advisable to use a waterproof sealant in all the wood joints to increase weather protection. Do ensure that large drainage holes (20mm - $\frac{3}{4}$ " - diameter) are drilled in the floor of the box. The front, back and sides **MUST** overhang the floor of the box.

Selecting a suitable tree

Having found a suitable area and gained the landowner's consent, you should carefully select the most suitable tree. Do not rush this. The success of your nestbox will depend partly on the size and shape of the tree, its position, and the position of the box when erected.

An isolated tree near an area of good habitat is ideal. Whenever possible, choose a tree with rough bark to enable owlets to climb back up to the box should they fall out. A tree on the outside of a copse is acceptable but avoid trees within woodland. Avoid siting your box within 1km ($\frac{1}{2}$ mile) of a dual-carriageway, motorway or similar modern road. If possible, choose a deciduous tree or a Scots Pine. Often there is no choice, but do have a good look around. Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted.

The ideal tree is old and very big. Pick a tree where the box will be visible below the crown (twigs/leaves) of the tree so that Barn Owls can see it and can fly in and out from various directions without having to negotiate small branches in the dark. Old Oak trees and Scots Pines are particularly accommodating in this respect.

If ivy is growing on the tree, it will probably obscure the entrance hole to the box within a few years. Anything that makes the hole less visible will reduce the chances of the box being used.

Old-style boxes with a low entrance (such as that shown in leaflet no. 4) must be situated within the branches of the tree. The box design in this leaflet (with the entrance hole high above the nest level) has a number of advantages over the low entrance boxes, as they can be attached either within the tree branches or on the side of a vertical tree trunk.

The main advantage of the box described in this leaflet is that it's fairly difficult for the young to get out. This reduces the chances of them falling from the box before they can fly and dying as a result of neglect or predation.

Another advantage of this style of box over some other designs, is that it provides an exercise area outside the box for the young and the flat roof allows the young to hop from the tray to the roof and then to the tree to exercise, and the reverse if they fall and need to climb back up. Many nestbox designs are impossible for the young to get back into unless they are already able to fly.

Siting the nestbox

Having found an area of good habitat and a suitable tree for your box, again take your time in deciding where in the tree you are going to put it. Several factors need to be considered. The box must face open ground so that the entrance hole is obvious to a passing owl. Do not hide it behind the tree - if the hole cannot be seen the box is unlikely to be used. Try to avoid facing the entrance into the prevailing wind and rain. Generally this means avoiding the west or south-west. South-east is generally a good direction. If you have no option but to face the entrance to the west/south-west, try to find another tree!

Barn Owls have used hollows entered from the top of the trunk down to ground level, so from the owl's point of view height may not be very important. However, an important consideration is that the nestbox is safe from interference by man. If a ladder is required in order to reach the box this will help deter the inquisitive passerby. A height in the region of 4.5-7 metres (14'-24') may be achieved depending on the tree concerned. It is a good idea to ensure that, when erected, the box is slightly lower at the front. This will help prevent rain water splashing in through the entrance hole.

Although young Barn Owls do not start to fly until eight weeks old, they begin to walk at only three weeks. There is often an age difference of two weeks between the oldest and the youngest owlet. As the oldest ones become more and more mobile they emerge from the nestbox to stretch, flap their wings and attempt short flights within the tree. It is at this stage that an owlet is most likely to fall to the ground. The chances of this can be reduced by positioning the box so that the owlet can jump easily from the tray or roof of the box into nearby branches. The box may need to be inspected or cleaned out in future so position the box so that this can be done safely.

Erecting the box

An outdoor box is quite heavy to lift single-handed and using ladders is potentially dangerous. The most important thing when erecting the box is your own safety (for which you are responsible). Please do not work alone and consider using two ladders. Tanalised 50mm x 50mm (2"x 2") timber and galvanised nails can be used to secure the box; often this is the only practical option. Alternatively you can drill holes and use nylon bolts.

A piece of tanalised timber 50mm x 50mm x 750mm (2" x 2" x 30") should be attached to the trunk of the tree, making sure that it is level and VERY secure. This should have 'hooks' made out of 25mm x 50mm (1"x 2") tanalised timber attached to each end. These should be approximately 75mm (3") long and the top 25mm (1") will protrude above the top of the ends of the 50mm x 50mm timber (see diagram). The purpose of this is to enable the box to be placed so that it is held in place by the hooks, allowing the person erecting the box to have both hands free whilst attaching it.

A second piece of 50mm x 50mm tanalised timber should be attached firmly to the back of the box approximately 200mm (8") from the top (see diagram). This should be attached from the inside of the box through to the timber, not through the timber into the box! This joint will take all the weight of the box so it needs to be very secure. The piece that is attached to the box will rest on the piece that is attached to the tree. Holes should be drilled to enable the two pieces to be nailed or screwed together when the box is in position. Bear in mind that it will be difficult to get at some parts of the timber to hammer or screw once the box is in position so drill the holes close to each end.

Safety

Before you erect your nestbox take time to consider the hazards you might face and what steps you could take to minimise the risks. Hazards might include an injury at a remote location; falling from a ladder; injury from heavy

lifting; dropping a nestbox onto another person; or poor positioning of a box resulting in additional hazards for anyone monitoring the box at a later date. The following are examples of precautions you should take to reduce the risks.

- 1 Ideally take a companion. If erecting your nestbox at an isolated site alone, let someone know where you are going and when you expect to be back before you set off. Carry a mobile phone if you have one.
- 2 Time spent in reconnaissance and preparation is seldom wasted. Never carry a box up into position until all preparatory work is complete. Double-check your measuring to confirm that the box will fit.
- 3 Ensure that your ladder is secure before climbing it. If possible tie it off at the top and bottom before climbing up with a nestbox.
- 4 Avoid over-reaching - never attempt to carry out any task up a ladder if you cannot reach comfortably.
- 5 When planning how to position, support and fix a nestbox, try to create a situation where the box can rest in position without being held. This will allow you to have both hands free to fix it safely.
- 6 When carrying a nestbox up a ladder, ensure that it is kept low relative to your body (ideally not above waist height). This will keep your centre of gravity down. Try to keep the box in front of both you and the ladder so that it pulls you towards the ladder - never hold a nestbox behind or above you.
- 7 You are responsible for your own safety - assess all the risks and be careful.

Nestboxes on poles

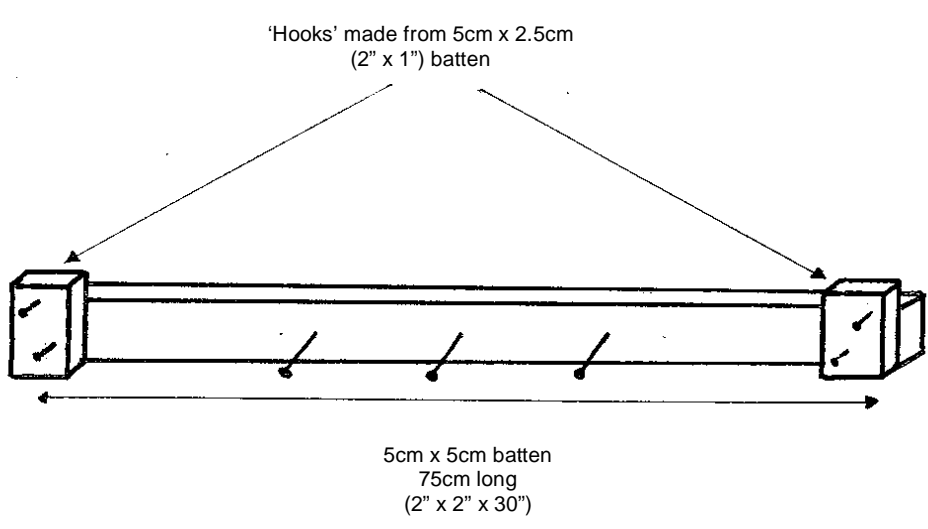
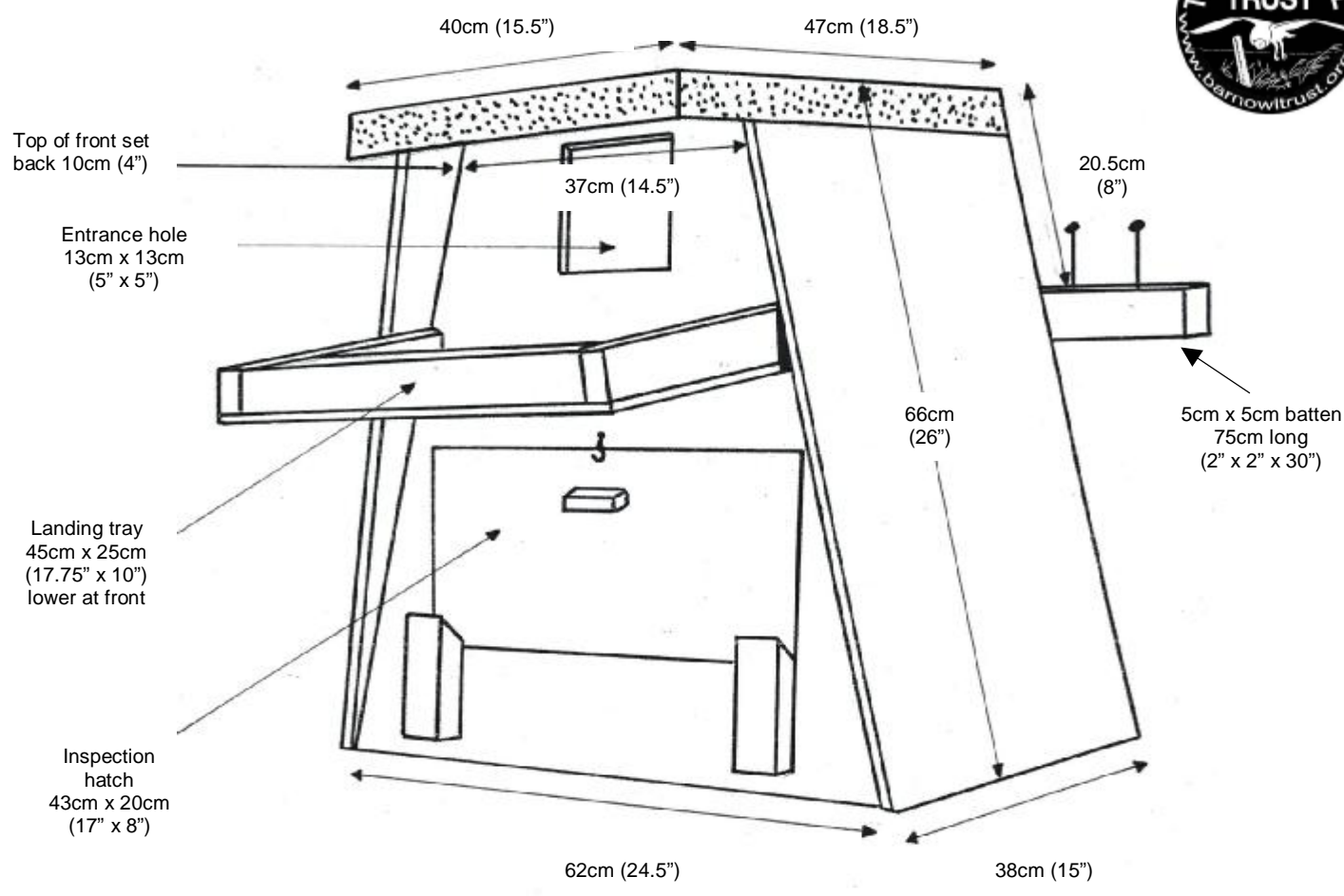
In areas with plenty of good habitat but no suitable trees or buildings it is possible to provide boxes on poles. It is illegal (and dangerous) to erect a box on an operational telegraph/electricity pole without the express permission of the pole owner. Erecting your own pole is a lot of work and can be expensive. With this type of project the boxes used are normally much bigger and of an entirely different design incorporating two separate cavities in one box.

Occupation by other species

The outdoor box described in this leaflet is designed specifically for Barn Owls but it is possible that jackdaws, stock doves, tawny owls, little owls or some other species could use it. Jackdaws can be a problem in some areas as they tend to take over all available sites, and can fill boxes with sticks. These should be cleaned out before the following February.

The Barn Owl Trust is a registered charity dedicated to the conservation of the Barn Owl and its environment. You can become a **Friend of the Barn Owl Trust** and support our work by making a regular donation. **Friends** receive our biannual magazine *Feedback*, our Annual Report, a car sticker and a badge.

The Trust provides a wide range of free leaflets on Barn Owl related matters. For details of these and further information about the Trust and its work, please write including a large SAE to the Barn Owl Trust, Waterleat, Ashburton, Devon TQ13 7HU
tel 01364 653026 - email info@barnowltrust.org.uk
web-site www.barnowltrust.org.uk



Restoring the Balance

We've lived side-by-side with Barn Owls for centuries. But in modern times wild Barn Owls have become increasingly rare - and the reasons are all man-made. The Barn Owl is a symbol of our relationship with the countryside: the decline of this beautiful bird reflects our attitude towards the environment. No species can prosper in isolation - not even human beings. All things are connected and if we lived in balance with nature then Barn Owls, and so much other wildlife, could thrive.

How you can help

You can help to conserve the Barn Owl by **Becoming a Friend** of the Trust and making an annual or monthly donation to support our work. If you are a UK tax payer and complete a simple **Gift Aid** declaration the Trust can reclaim the tax paid on your donation and significantly increase the value of your gift at no extra cost to you. Standing order and Gift Aid forms are provided below. Please consider paying by **Standing Order** as this greatly reduces our administration time and costs.

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UK Friends: Individual £20; Family (same address) £25

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Owlets: UK £20; Overseas £25. Owlets are Junior Friends. They receive a personal ID card, Feedback and goody bag. (If children are under 16, please state ages. One or more children from the same family at one address can be Owlets.)

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I would like to become a Friend of the Trust and receive my Friend's pack - I enclose £ _____ * (see above)

I am pleased to enclose a donation of £ _____ *

**UK taxpayers please complete Gift Aid declaration below.*

Sorry, donations of under £5 are not acknowledged without an SAE.

The contact details you submit on this form will be held by the Barn Owl Trust on a secure computer system and may be used by the Trust in pursuit of its aims. Please let us know if you object to this.

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Name _____ Date _____

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Please pay £ _____ on the first day of each **month*/year*** (* delete one) starting in the month of _____

and a like sum on the same date each **month*/year*** until further notice to the account of

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My signature _____ Account Number _____

To the manager _____ Bank _____

Bank Address _____ Postcode _____

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Please fill in and sign the appropriate parts of this form and post it to:

The Barn Owl Trust, Waterleat, Ashburton, Devon TQ13 7HU

If you'd like to receive information by post, please tick the boxes below and enclose a large stamped addressed envelope:

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Consultancy/Site Assessment Service (full details also on our website)

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