

Boxing Clever – a combination of the provision of nesting boxes for raptors and appropriate grassland management delivers results

Wade Muggleton

The practice of putting up a bird box is widely considered as a positive act and many of us have tit or sparrow boxes. When we ramp up the scale of boxes to far larger species the benefits can be surprising.

I have always had a love of raptors and there is a school of thought that for some of our species such as owls and Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* a lack of suitable nest sites is now a major restriction to their breeding success. So having an 11 acre smallholding I put up a Kestrel box and two Barn Owl *Tyto alba* boxes not expecting any quick results, if any at all. So I couldn't believe our good fortune when Kestrels moved into the box I had put up in the fork of a hedgerow Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* during the first spring after installation (01).



01. Kestrel nested in the first spring. Wade Muggleton.

With the box set high up in a tree and no camera in it, it was hard to ascertain what was happening: the adults seemed to sit for an awfully long time with no sign of any chicks. Kestrels can be notoriously noisy birds when viewed from a distance with much calling and associated aerial displaying. However, whenever we approached the tree, to get within 20 or 30 yards, everything dropped to complete silence with not a sign of movement anywhere. So in early July on a day when we were confident that the adults were away from the nest, we strapped a Go Pro camera to a long roofing lathe with gaffer tape and raised it up to take a photo of the inside of the box. This revealed three good-sized chicks (02), which duly went on to fledge on 15th and 16th July 2021.



02. Kestrel chicks filmed with GoPro camera. Wade Muggleton.

Inspired by this success, we rigged up the nest box with a camera & cable feed powered by a car battery for spring 2022. Of course, being fully prepared, the birds didn't use the box that year. Sod's Law; don't expect nature to go along with our plans!

In late winter 2022/23 I decided to inspect all the boxes in preparation for another nesting season. Upon climbing a ladder I opened the inspection door on the triangular Barn Owl box and got the shock of my life when a Tawny Owl *Strix aluco* stared back at me. Shutting the door as quickly as possible I beat a hasty retreat, having been lucky it didn't fly into my face. So it was great excitement to have Tawny Owls in a Barn Owl box. Nature is obviously not bothered by the RSPB species classification of nest boxes!

However, our hopes seemed dashed when in a vicious late-winter storm the box was blown out the tree, severing the metal hex screws it was fixed with. The box upside down on the ground contained the smashed remains of three eggs - we were devastated. It was only about three weeks later when we plugged in the camera on the Kestrel box that had the chicks in 2021 and had then been unused in 2022, that there on camera was a sitting Tawny Owl (03). The Kestrel box is probably 100 yards from the Barn Owl box which had blown down, so they had obviously decamped to the Kestrel box and laid another clutch. Now we had Tawnies on camera (04) and would be able to watch them develop. Again, tawnies in a Kestrel box : so much for that species-specific nest box business.



03. Tawny Owl nesting in Kestrel Box. Wade Muggleton.



04. Two chicks were reared. Wade Muggleton.

Now the camera will record, but a live feed drains the car battery down quickly, so we only recorded for 10 or 20 mins every few days but evidently two chicks hatched. In due course we got to view them when the parents were out hunting (05) and were able to watch them grow up and branch (the semi-fledged status of Tawnies when they leave the box but just sit in the nearby trees still being fed by the parents) (06).

Although we still see Kestrels around, they have not returned to nest yet, so I have now put another Kestrel box in another hedgerow tree to give them a choice should Tawny Owls squat in one of the boxes again.



05. Tawny Owlet in Kestrel Box. Wade Muggleton.



06. Tawny Owlet branching. Wade Muggleton.

The Barn Owl box which blew out of the tree was reinstated with extra fittings. The other Barn Owl box which we installed in a barn had been there for six years with Jackdaws *Coloeus monedula* in residence every year. In Spring 2023 Jackdaws did again nest in it, so we thought nothing more of it. It was only on 24th July, after working in my orchard that I decided to walk the rest of the field just because it was a beautiful evening and as I wandered around I saw a Barn Owl lift out of the tree line and glide across the pasture in front of me. It alighted on a fence post some 20 yards from me and so we looked at each other until it lifted off and sailed over the adjacent hedge into my orchard. Not quite believing what I had seen, the next evening I took my family up in blind optimism that the owl might just be hunting over our ground again. It did indeed appear and sailed over our heads into the Barn Owl box in the barn; we really couldn't believe it. The outbreak of screeching from within the box confirmed the presence of chicks. So having never seen a Barn Owl on our own land in the ten years we had owned it, Barn Owls had now moved in (07), nested and hatched chicks, completely unbeknown to us. To say we were delighted and excited was an understatement. From late July and all through August we spent many evenings camouflaged, sitting in complete silence watching, firstly parents hunting, taking voles into the box and as August progressed we watched the chicks emerge and then begin to fledge, still occupying the box during the day. Three chicks fledged by early September and there remained the mystery of how late they seemed. We presumed that the Jackdaws had fledged before the Barn Owls took up residence. As avid viewers of Springwatch which in 2023 featured a box of Barn Owls, we noted that ours were weeks later by comparison.

Over the course of three years we have had Kestrels, Tawny Owls and then Barn Owls all nest in boxes I put up and this is just on our little 11 acre smallholding. We feel it shows how beneficial boxes are as I do not believe there are suitable natural nest sites on our land. By providing these boxes we are allowing raptors to breed where they would be unlikely to do so otherwise.



07. The crowning Glory of 2023. Nesting Barn Owls reared and fledged three chicks. Wade Muggleton.

Putting up boxes, providing homes is all very well, but is only half of the equation to successful raptor conservation, the other half being habitat management. It is all very well providing boxes but if the food source and habitat isn't there to support the birds any success will be short-lived. We only have eight acres of pasture which we graze with up to six English Longhorns (08). Using a mob grazing system of moving them every two to three days using electric fencing, there is always a plentiful supply of long grass which from observation provides the habitat for voles to flourish. We have no idea where the Barn Owls came from, having not had a single sighting in the previous 10 years, but they found us, moved in and succeeded in rearing three chicks to adulthood so presumably the habitat and the box provided them with everything they needed.



08. It is the long grass created by the Mob grazing of the Longhorns that creates the Owl-friendly vole habitat.

I hope this story proves that a few simple low-cost acts like making and putting up boxes and allowing areas of long grass to flourish can have a profound effect on the status of our raptors.

Images

01. Kestrels nested in the first Spring. Wade Muggleton.
02. Three chicks were present and all fledged. Wade Muggleton.
03. Tawny Owls nested in the Kestrel box in 2023. Wade Muggleton.
04. Two chicks were reared. Wade Muggleton.
05. Tawny Owlet in Kestrel box. Wade Muggleton.
06. Tawny Owlet branching. Wade Muggleton.
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