

Barn Owl Report

2025



**Ulster
Wildlife**



Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by Ulster Wildlife's Species Conservation Team, Katy Bell and Ross McIlwrath.

We would like to thank all the people involved, directly or indirectly, in supporting barn owl conservation over this last year. Thank you to every single person who carried out a survey, made or put up a barn owl box, carried out barn owl ringing, attended a talk, or reported a sighting.

Our thanks include, but are not limited to, the following organisations and individuals for their contributions - the Barn Owl Trust, BASC, the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), BirdWatch Ireland (BWI), Centre for Environmental Data and Recording (CEDaR), Comber Rotary, National Trust, National Biodiversity Data Centre, NI Raptor Study Group (NIRSG), RSPB NI, Ulster Wildlife staff, volunteers, and of course the nest minders. Thank you also to our funders NIEA & DAERA through the Carrier Bag Levy, the Garfield Weston Foundation, Power NI, and Ulster Wildlife Members.

It is always inspiring to see that so many of you stand in solidarity with us to help the recovery of this iconic species in Northern Ireland. 2025 has been an exciting but challenging year and a good one for barn owls; with combined conservation efforts paying off.



Picture 1: Katy Bell, Senior Conservation Officer, Ronald Surgenor, Nature Reserves Officer, Emily Legge, PhD Placement Student, Andrew Croy, Nature Reserves Manager and Maureen Carvill, Wildlife Gardening Officer putting up barn owl boxes in February 2025.

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Introduction

Since 2010, Ulster Wildlife has undertaken work focusing on the conservation of barn owls (*Tyto alba*) in Northern Ireland. Classed as “Least Concern” on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) red list on the global scale, the situation in Northern Ireland is very different. Land use change across Ireland has led to loss of suitable habitat, including loss of foraging and nesting habitat for barn owls causing drastic declines. The last population estimate in the 1980s put the breeding population at only 30 to 50 breeding pairs (Northern Ireland Species Action Plan, 2006); but we estimate there are now fewer than 30 pairs in Northern Ireland. Fortunately, they are protected and appear as a priority species in the updated Northern Ireland Priority Species list and are also “Red Listed” in Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland. We are thankfully sharing good news for 2025 as NI’s barn owls had another good breeding year, in contrast to Great Britain where productivity was down in 2025. Data is not yet available for Ireland.

As an important part of our natural and cultural heritage, Ulster Wildlife’s barn owl work aims to develop and advance barn owl conservation locally. This work feeds into Ulster Wildlife’s vision of a wilder future where people and nature are thriving together. Ulster Wildlife carries out a range of conservation actions, such as raising awareness of barn owls locally, the management of sightings, monitoring nesting pairs, the construction and the erection of nest boxes, and offering advice and support to landowners to improve their habitat for barn owls. In addition, our focus in the summer months is co-ordinating an annual barn owl survey. The aim is to visit sites that are most likely to host barn owls in order to discover new active roost or nest sites, as well as checking nesting boxes for signs of occupation. Knowing the exact locations of roosting and breeding barn owls is essential to target conservation efforts. Surveying for barn owls is not an easy task, particularly due to the low population densities that exist here. In addition, the fact that they are nocturnal and one of our most elusive birds make them even harder to locate. Discussions are in place to develop a new methodology for carrying out surveys locally after some initial analysis with the BTO and BWI.

This report gives an overview of the work undertaken by Ulster Wildlife throughout 2025, with an important focus on the barn owl survey, sightings, nest monitoring and boxes. It compares results with the findings of the previous years, and Ulster Wildlife’s work plan for 2026 will be covered.

2. Barn Owl Work

2.1 Sightings

We are very pleased to see support from the public continue with regular sightings of barn owls reported via the Ulster Wildlife website, emails, phone calls, social media, or online through CEDaR’s website and iRecord.

By the end of 2025, there were a total of **28** barn owl sightings submitted and verified by Ulster Wildlife. This was low compared to 57 sightings in 2024, however several other sightings were submitted that could not be verified. We would encourage people to submit barn owl sightings to us through the website or email address below. This data gives us an insight into where birds may be nesting or roosting and allows us to

target conservation action specifically where it is needed. Public engagement is vital in raising awareness and we plan to try and encourage more sightings in 2026. There was a total of **57** long-eared owl sightings submitted and verified compared to 69 in 2024, and 59 in 2023. Please send as much information as possible with a record. The winter of 2025 saw very few short-eared owl records submitted and we received 5 sightings. In **Figure 1** all of the verified barn owl and long-eared owl sightings received by Ulster Wildlife have been mapped.

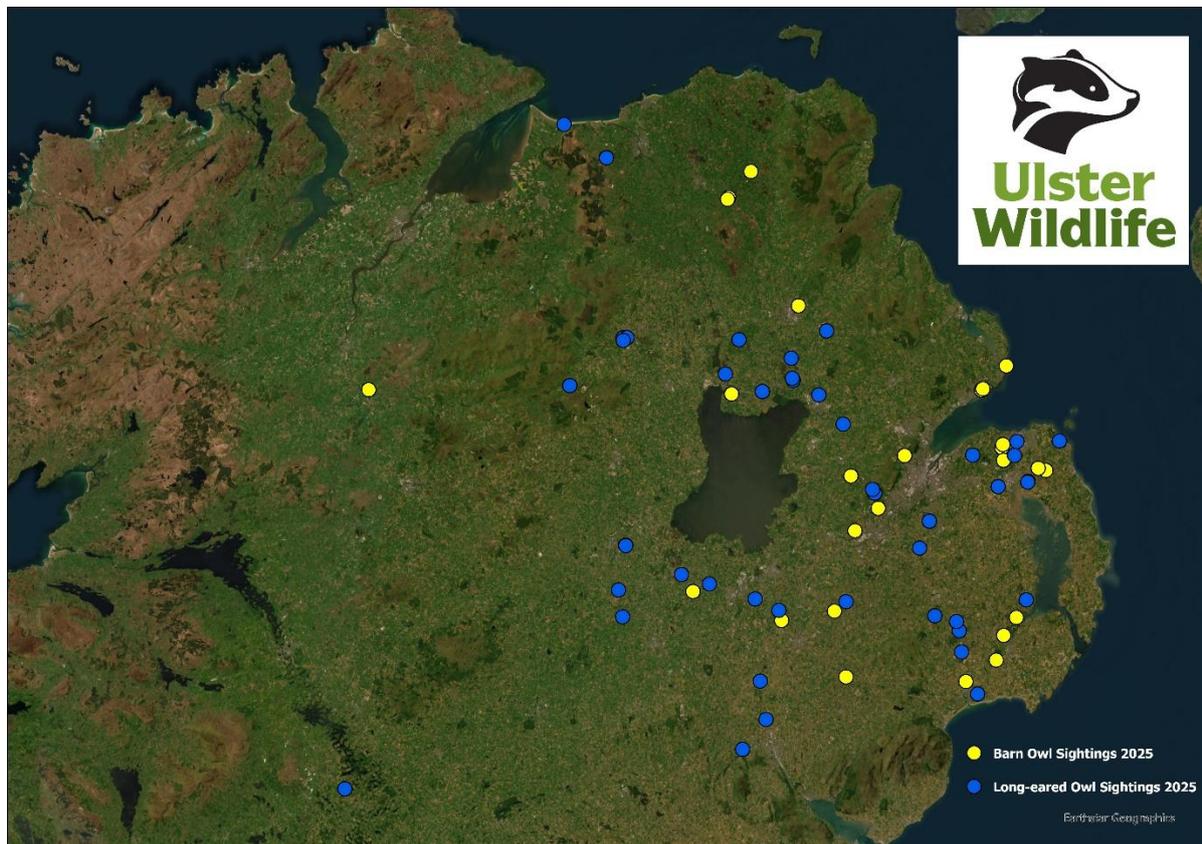


Figure 1: Verified sightings of Barn Owls and Long-eared Owls in Northern Ireland 2025.

We work closely with BirdWatch Ireland as it is important to collaborate on an All-Ireland basis as barn owls can travel long distances in search of foraging areas and new nest sites. This work is vital to get a clear picture of what is happening with barn owls across Ireland as a whole. We also collaborate across the UK with the Barn Owl Trust on the State of the UK Barn Owl Population reports.

To submit an owl sighting for Northern Ireland visit:

- Ulster Wildlife: <https://www.ulsterwildlife.org/report-sightings> or report it to barnowls@ulsterwildlife.org.
- Alternatively submit it via CEDaR or iRecord.

To submit a sighting for the Republic of Ireland visit:

- BirdWatch Ireland: <https://bit.ly/barnowl-survey>.

2.2 Dead barn owl reports

Thankfully 2025 saw a small number of dead barn owls being reported, 3 in total (**Figure 2**). However, every barn owl death will impact the local population. All 3 of these were found as a result of road traffic collisions (RTCs). **Figure 2** shows 10 barn owls over 3 years and all of these were road deaths. We encourage reports of dead barn owls as this data is extremely important. If you find a dead barn owl, please do not touch it and report it to barnowls@ulsterwildlife.org.



Figure 2: Deceased barn owls found and reported from 2023-2025.

2.3 Known active nest sites

In 2025, Ulster Wildlife, along with volunteer nest minders, monitored a number of active nest sites. 2025 was a positive year with another new nest site being found in Northern Ireland this year. Across Britain and Ireland barn owl productivity was down this year due to weather conditions and so the team were apprehensive about how the local barn owls had fared.

Ulster Wildlife monitored **10** nests, with the Lough Neagh Barn Owl Group monitoring a number of other nest sites (contact the group directly for information). This is a really encouraging figure, with barn owls having a good breeding year. There were a number of nest sites that were unfortunately inaccessible and so we are unable to report the total number of fledged chicks. Ringing was carried out with BTO Ringers at 4 of the nest sites in County Down. The majority of the nest sites monitored are in tree boxes

but there were also several pairs nesting in tree cavities and in old buildings. Overall fledgling numbers and productivity was similar to 2024 which was a great result considering the weather conditions in 2025.

Table 1 shows another successful breeding year for barn owls in 2025, despite the weather and the fact that some of the chick numbers are unknown. **Please note the new codes for recording nesting attempts to align with the BTO (see codes below).** We hope that these pairs continue to flourish, and the number of fledglings continues to increase. This will hopefully lead to more pairs establishing and the collaborative conservation efforts locally are vital to achieving this. A new nest site was discovered in 2025, and we hope to see successful breeding in 2026. Please note site names are only made public with the landowner’s permission.

Nest site	Nest success/Number of fledged chicks			
	2022	2023	2024	2025
Mount Stewart	1	2	3	3
Strangford	4	4	4	2
Finnebrogue	OU	3	SUCCESS	3
Downpatrick 1	3	4	2	4
Downpatrick 2	N/A	1	1	1
Co. Antrim	N/A	SUCCESS	3	SUCCESS
Fermanagh 2	N/A	1	SUCCESS	OU
Fermanagh 3	N/A	N/A	SUCCESS	SS
Co. Down 1	4	5	SUCCESS	SS
Co. Down 2 (NEW)	N/A	N/A	N/A	SS
Total	12	20	13	13
Mean	3	2.9	2.6	2.6

- **NUMBER** – Number of fledged chicks.
- **SUCCESS** – Successful breeding but number of fledglings unknown.
- **SS** – Birds present but no breeding at site.
- **OU** – Outcome of nesting attempt unknown.

Table 1: Nest activity within the Ulster Wildlife monitored nest sites.

This year we were able to celebrate the Kelly family in County Down for their wildlife-friendly efforts and the fact that barn owls had returned for 3 years running to breed on the farm - [Co. Down farm nurtures rare barn owls for third year running | Ulster Wildlife](#). The story was shared widely in newspapers, on TV and radio. This farm is helping the future of barn owls locally and shows how targeted management options such as wild bird cover and winter stubble, delivered through Agri-environment Schemes, have been effective in helping barn owls by ensuring a year-round supply of food. It is essential that schemes like this continue to deliver for both farmers and nature.

Another farmer was celebrated at the Farming Life Awards in October, where Mark Sandford from Finnebrogue Farm jointly won the Nature Friendly Farmer of the Year. Mark has transformed Finnebrogue farm with nature-friendly measures and barn owls successfully bred on the farm this year again fledging 3 chicks. Mark has shown how essential it is that farmers work with nature and not against it.

Mount Stewart, Strangford and Downpatrick 1 (Ballycruttle Farm) had more successful seasons with the pairs returning and fledging chicks once again. A number of our other sites are confidential but providing havens for barn owls to breed and overwinter. A site name is only made public if the landowner chooses to and new sites are always confidential while the pairs establish.

NOTE: All photos taken under licence from NIEA.



Pictures 2 & 3: Two of the barn owls ringed by BTO ringers in 2025.

2.4 Survey

For the 2025 survey, we contacted everyone on our register that has a barn owl box and asked that the landowner check the box location themselves for any signs of occupation (whitewash, pellets, feathers, noise) during the months of August and September. This was done at a distance from the box itself so as not to cause any disturbance. Each surveyor received a copy of the Survey Methodology, a Recording Form and a Risk Assessment. We asked that people provide us with up-to-date information regarding the nesting box: whether it was occupied, the grid reference, and whether it needed repaired or replaced. That way we can see whether a box needs to be replaced, or we need to add boxes in an area. A number of boxes were also checked by Ulster Wildlife staff under licence to determine if they were being used. In total **85** boxes were checked for signs of barn owl activity throughout August and September (**Figure 3**). A further focus was to investigate reports of owls in particular areas where the data might indicate a nesting pair. Thank you to all the volunteers and Ulster Wildlife staff who helped with the surveys this year.

Due to barn owl's elusive nature, box minders do not always pick up activity in boxes. This year, with the Ulster Wildlife nestbox network containing over 250 boxes across the whole country, staff physically checked a number of nest boxes in key locations, under license, for roosting and nesting activity. These boxes were checked based on several factors including their proximity to verified sightings. These checks proved fruitful, with 4 boxes showing signs of recent owl activity and 3 additional boxes showing signs from previous years. Box minders reported 1 additional nestbox with owl activity.

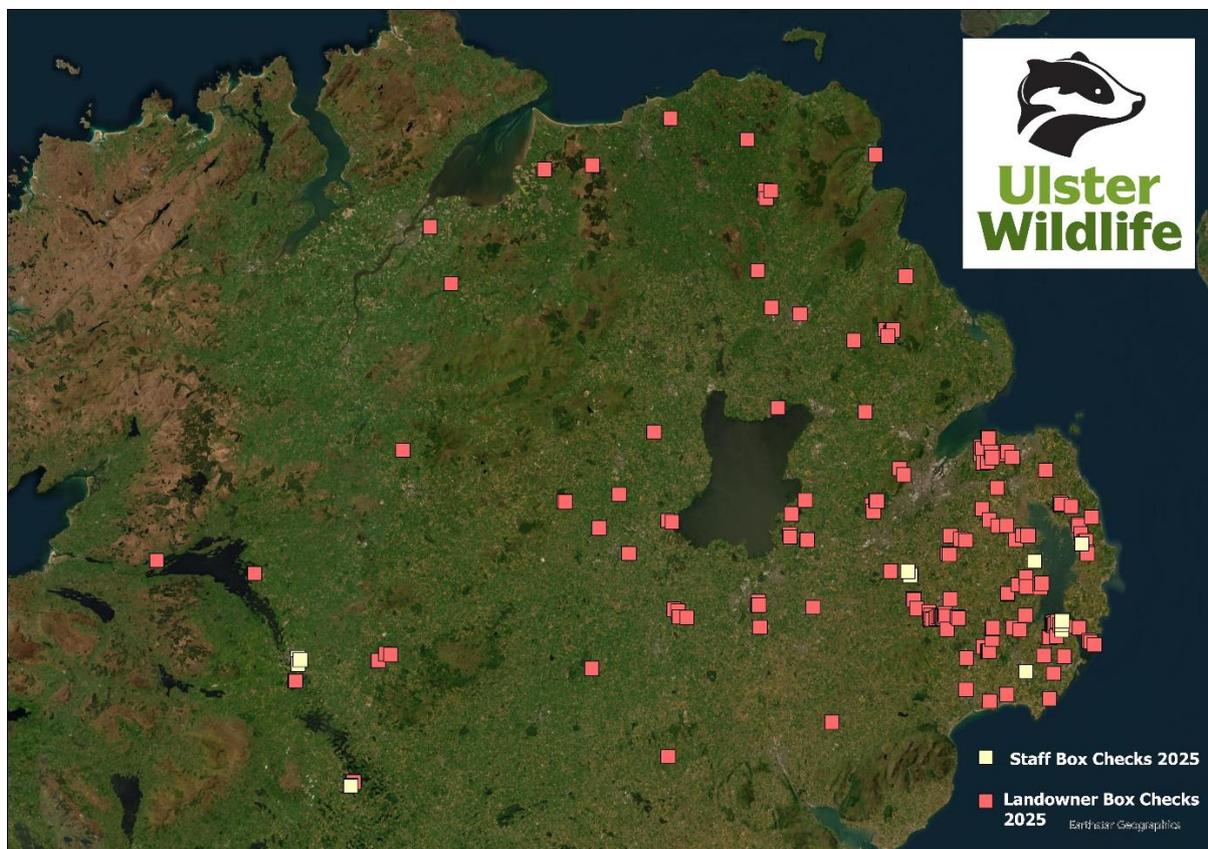


Figure 3: Location of the boxes and sites surveyed in 2025.

2.5 Boxes

Since the beginning of the year, **18** new barn owl boxes have been erected by Ulster Wildlife across Northern Ireland (**Figure 4**). We focused on priority areas where we knew barn owls were present nearby in order to provide nesting and roosting areas for fledging chicks, and also areas of suitable foraging habitat. Boxes have been placed using a 'Nature Recovery Network Approach'. A total of **37** site visits were carried out to landowners where we provided advice on boxes and land management (**Figure 4**). There were a number of other people where advice was given via email or phone call. Our 'Improving Land for Barn Owls' leaflet was given to everyone who got in touch. A number of talks and events were also carried out in key areas to raise awareness of barn owls.

There are several organisations and volunteer groups that make nesting boxes for Ulster Wildlife. Our thanks to all the groups, young people and volunteers who helped with this, especially Comber Rotary, BASC and Stephen's Shed. A huge thank you also to everyone that has provided locations for barn owl boxes to date.

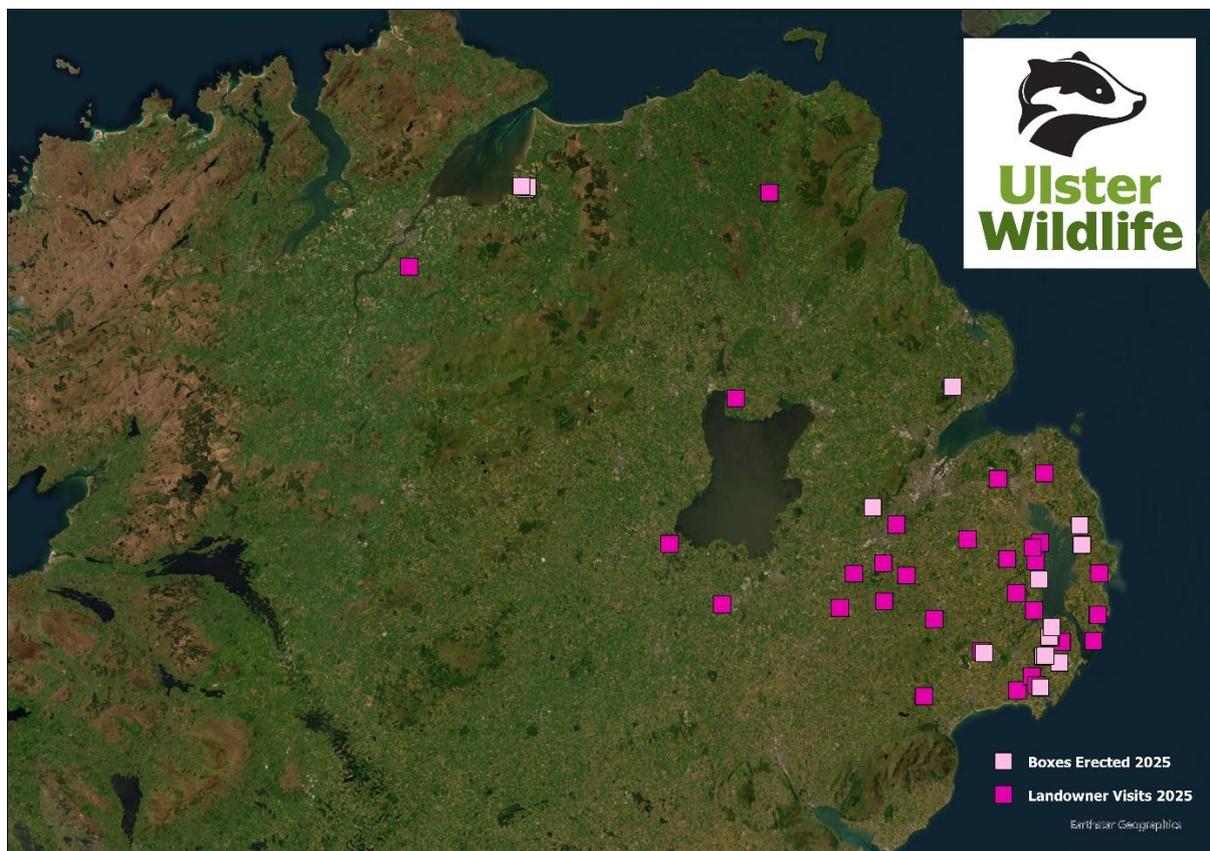


Figure 4: Locations where barn owl boxes were erected and site visits carried out by Ulster Wildlife in 2025.

While we aim to support everyone who gets in contact with us, as there is a high demand for nest boxes, we must prioritise sites which are the most suitable for barn owls. This work is carried out mainly in late autumn and winter, outside of the breeding season. We make the decision on whether to visit a site based on certain parameters such as proximity to an existing nest site, the number of sightings in the area, the

abundance of rough grassland, thick hedgerows, and other suitable habitat features. Also, any negative site features are taken into account, such as the proximity to a main road. We always visit a site before we make the decision on whether the site is suitable for a box. If you think you have land that could support barn owls, please contact barnowls@ulsterwildlife.org.



Pictures 4 & 5: Ulster Wildlife staff and volunteers erecting barn owl boxes in 2025.

2.6 Awareness raising

Through our work, Ulster Wildlife aims to raise awareness of barn owls in Northern Ireland and how people can help them. Throughout 2025 we delivered **4 talks** and **6 events** engaging with over **260 people** in total. This included a talk for farmers in Fermanagh, a talk for Ulster Wildlife members and stands at various events. This is an important part of the work and allows us to talk to local people and communities to help grow support for barn owl conservation. Our work featured on several news outlets with our story on the Kelly farm included on BBC News NI and BBC Radio Ulster and we were also featured on Countryfile in early 2025 (**Picture 6**).

Also in 2025, we were very fortunate to engage in an exciting collaboration with Marc Craig, an artist who created the 'Ark of Extinction project', turning street art into action for endangered species. Marc created a barn owl mural at Bog Meadows Nature Reserve in Belfast (**Picture 7**) in the hope of connecting more people in Belfast to barn owls and raise awareness of this special bird locally- [Barn owl takes flight in west Belfast as new mural is unveiled | Ulster Wildlife](#).



Picture 6: Katy Bell and Matt Baker filming Countryfile.



Picture 7: Barn owl mural at Bog Meadows Nature Reserve in Belfast.

In 2025 we joined forces with the Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group (NIRSG) and RSPB NI through the PAW NI Wildlife Crime Group to bring a petition to Stormont. Ulster Wildlife supported the petition for a ban on the possession of dangerous pesticides. We met with DAERA Minister Andrew Muir, and he agreed to start working towards this legislative change (**Picture 8**).



Picture 8: Ulster Wildlife, NIRSG, RSPB NI meeting with Andrew Muir at Stormont.

We have continued to share our guidance for 'Improving Land for Barn Owls' which provides detail on what barn owls need to survive in the local countryside. This advice is for landowners and farmers to be able to take action to provide foraging habitat and nesting provisions for this important local species.

You can find the booklet here - [Barn Owl Land Management Leaflet.pdf](#)

3. Limitations and successes

The use of thermal imaging equipment has improved our surveying abilities by allowing us to check boxes from the ground. This technology can tell us whether a box is occupied and therefore minimising any potential disturbance. Through our funders, we purchased thermal imaging binoculars and monoculars which have been put to good use at every site visit. This equipment is also extremely valuable during evening surveys.

This winter we again increased the number of nest cameras placed at nest sites under licence. This will hopefully improve our knowledge of the inaccessible sites and also our understanding of the birds' behaviour during the breeding season.

In 2025, a BSc student from Cardiff University joined Ulster Wildlife and will be with us until May 2026. Rebekah has already been a huge help to the species work and has been carrying out a project on barn owl diet, continuing on the work of previous students. A huge thanks to Rebekah for her help this year. Having an extra member of the team has been a significant help, especially with the number of nest sites increasing. Ulster Wildlife will continue to consider how we might bring in additional capacity to this important area of work.

4. Future plans

Our main aim in 2026 will again be to identify further nest sites as well as continue to support current nest sites. We hope that the number of nest sites that we monitor will continue to increase and this means an increased number of nest minders and barn owl pairs to support. Our target audience through our communications will continue to be farmers and landowners. We want to ensure that land is managed properly for barn owls and that anyone that knows of a nest site is engaged with and supported. We will also be encouraging measures to be put in place to support barn owls in future Agri-environment Schemes. We will continue to carry out site visits and provide advice on nature-friendly land management. This year we aim to run more events for landowners as well as ongoing collaboration with partners. Ulster Wildlife will continue raising awareness of barn owls at a local scale and the pressures and threats they face. We will be carrying out an annual survey again in 2026 and hope to increase the number of potential sites checked.

Ulster Wildlife has been collaborating closely with BirdWatch Ireland to collect data for a diet study of the barn owl on the island of Ireland. This year we plan to dissect more pellets to provide valuable information on what these birds are feeding on at various sites across Ireland. Now more than ever this information is needed as field vole (*Microtus agrestis*) have been recorded in Northern Ireland, with the main evidence for this being found in owl pellets (Moore et al. 2025). It is vital that we find out more information about their spread and their local impact. Ulster Wildlife is working with Queen's University Belfast on a PhD project to carry out research over the coming years.

5. Conclusion

In Northern Ireland, even after a good breeding year, barn owls remain very vulnerable and elusive. The annual survey, carried out by volunteers during the summer, allowed us to check **85** boxes. We received **28** barn owl sightings and **57** long-eared owl sightings this year, and we continue to encourage these sightings. New boxes in key areas, and periods of dry and warm weather, allowed barn owl pairs to have another good breeding year. Barn owls are particularly vulnerable to prolonged heavy rain periods which badly impact breeding success - unfortunately such weather conditions are likely to be more frequent due to climate change and we therefore need to work hard to ensure the population is as resilient as possible.

There were **over 13** barn owl chicks, born to **5 pairs** in 2025 in sites monitored by Ulster Wildlife, with more fledging from inaccessible sites, so **10** pairs in total and this is a very welcome boost to our local population. By expanding the barn owl box network locally, the aim is to provide more opportunities for birds to nest and roost.

Ulster Wildlife also believes that land management is key to barn owls' survival and this remains crucial in helping our population here in Northern Ireland. We want to encourage more landowners to take action for barn owls. We also support Agri-environment Schemes that deliver for nature and hope that the development of the Farming with Nature Scheme includes measures to protect barn owls.

Finally, 2026 brings exciting opportunities to forward plan for the future of our barn owl conservation work. We want to be able to find more nest sites, support more landowners and nest minders, and ultimately play our part in helping to protect the important population of barn owls in Northern Ireland. We are looking forward to the year ahead and the continuation of our conservation work on this iconic species. We anticipate that this year will build on the successes of recent years. We hope that once again we can rely on your support, as we have relied on it historically, to help build a future for one of Northern Ireland's most iconic species.

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