

What's on the Menu?

By Su Gough Communication & PR Officer Hawk and Owl Trust

We are used to reading about the link between bird of prey and owl numbers and the population levels of their prey and, in this issue, we have examined the effect that the last winter's weather may have on the coming breeding season in part, at least, down to the availability of prey, which will also have struggled in the snowy and frozen conditions.

If asked what raptors and owls feed on, many of us would immediately say small mammals such as voles and mice. But just how restricted is their diet in reality?

In temperate areas, such as the UK, conditions can be highly variable and being dependent on any one source of food may lead to significant survival challenges at certain times. It pays to be adaptable and our most successful species are those that are able to utilise the widest range of potential food.

Tawny Owl is our most numerous owl, with around 50,000 pairs breeding each year. They are birds of woodland, but their adaptability has enabled them to take advantage of any habitats with trees, including farmland, rural areas and even the centres of our largest cities.

One key to the

Tawny Owl's success is its surprisingly opportunistic approach to food. Yes, as you would expect, they feed on voles, mice and rats, but their menu is quite a bit broader than this suggests.

Various food studies have discovered that they take a wider range of mammals, tackling species as large as Rabbit, Grey Squirrel and even Hedgehog. As all of these weigh more than a Tawny Owl it bears testament to the hunting skill of the owl!

Moles feature heavily as well during the summer when young Moles are on the surface moving into new territories, and the owls take advantage of this glut.

Bats occur on the menu occasionally. Despite both bats and owls being nocturnal, bats are extremely small, fast and agile, and their echolocation will often alert them to an approaching predator. Even so, some particular individual Tawny Owls are known to have honed their bat-catching skills and specialise in targeting bats, particularly at roost sites where large numbers can be caught in one evening.

More surprising is the frequency of day-flying birds, either



caught at dusk and dawn, or possibly taken at roost during the night. Chaffinch seems to be especially at risk accounting, being a common bird sharing the same wooded habitats as the owls, and accounting for 50% of all the bird remains recorded. A huge range of other birds are occasionally taken, with the owls tackling species up to and including Jay, Jackdaw and Wood Pigeon in size. We have even recorded ducklings being brought to nest boxes.

Other vertebrates feature highly as well, with some individual birds either targeting their favoured prey, or making the most

Photos © Su Delve (above, right); Liz Dacks (top left); H&OT (top, bottom left)

Above: Frogs are frequently targeted by Tawny Owls and their remains are often found in owl pellets.

Top left: Day-flying birds may seem an unusual prey choice, but Chaffinches, which share the same wooded habitats seem at risk.

Bottom left: Although both nocturnal, a Tawny Owl has to be fast and agile to catch a bat, but some individuals show a real skill for it and even specialise in bat catching.



How do we find out what Tawny Owls eat?

PELLETS: The most popular and well-known method. Small and medium-sized prey is swallowed whole, and the inedible parts, such as bones, fur and scales are then coughed back up. Although very useful, and completely non-invasive for the birds, certain prey items such as earthworms, which may be important in the diet, will not show up in the pellet due to their lack of hard parts. Larger prey items will not be swallowed whole and, as only the soft flesh will be eaten, again will leave no remains in the pellet.

AUTOPSY: Birds that die of natural causes can be autopsied. Victims of starvation in winter, however, may give an unbalanced view of the usual foods as, at that point, they will be desperately hungry and trying, unsuccessfully, to eat anything. Other mortalities, such as road traffic accidents etc, can give very valuable clues as to the whole diet, including the relative importance of all the food items that don't leave traces in pellets.

NEST CAMERAS: These provide useful information on the diet during the breeding season. Males provision the nest and often the female will 'stock-pile' food while it is available in case of later shortages. This allows the opportunity to identify each item, with images proving such unexpected prey as fish, rabbits and ducklings being offered. Footage showed that one unfortunate Grey Squirrel met its end when it foolishly poked its head into a box when the female Tawny Owl was incubating. Lightning fast reactions from the owl meant there was suddenly a squirrel added to the pile of prey at the bottom of the box!

Top: Caterpillars and other soft-bodied prey such as earthworms leave no sign in pellets.

Above: Tawny Owls are very capable of tackling prey heavier than themselves. Even squirrels are not safe.

of a local abundance: remains of snakes and frogs are common although newts, despite being caught, are rarely consumed. Perhaps they are easy to catch but taste awful!

Nest cameras show that fish are often brought to the brooding female and chicks, and sometimes they can continue flapping around

the box, much to the fascination of the birds!

In fact, looking at the range of prey items recorded there does seem to be a high number of species found in and around water, once more emphasising how important ponds and waterways are to our gardens in towns and villages.

A final group of animals that are frequently found are insects and other invertebrates. These rarely leave traces in pellets, but stomachs of birds that have died of natural causes often

have large numbers of earthworms, and beetles in them. Big, meaty Cockchafer (May Bugs) are a favourite.

If the opportunity arises Tawny Owls have even been recorded feeding on carrion, and this may become a real lifesaver in times of need.

One thing that is clear is that far from being at the mercy of vole and mouse numbers, Tawny Owls are supreme predators, and fully able to take advantage of any local feeding opportunities that arise and adapt quickly to changing circumstances.