I may seem obsessed, says Chris Sperring, South-west Conservation Officer, but I am, once again, going to talk about extreme weather and its effects on our wildlife. The two so-called 'Beasts from the East' in late winter set down the foundations for the 2018 breeding season, and the repercussions of these events were obvious from the start of our nest monitoring. Active Tawny Owl nests were few and far between, with obvious signs that many of the early breeders had given up on their nests all together.

When Tawny Owlets leave the nest they are unable to fly properly and scramble about in the tree canopy noisily calling to help their parents locate them for feeding, a process known as 'branching'. This calling also helps surveyors to locate and record them during spring evenings, and allows us to keep track of successful breeding activity in different locations without having to find actual nest holes. Numbers always fluctuate for many different reasons, but this year in my local study area I noticed that right up until late May the sound of these owlets was missing from almost every area with owls holding territory. The real confirmation of this came during an annual all-night walk that I lead over the Mendip Hills. This walk takes me past eight woodlands and the potential of nine Tawny Owl territories (last surveyed January 2018). In past years when I've led this walk, vocalising owlets have been obvious, albeit with varying numbers, but during this year's walk, and for the first time ever, no owlets were heard at all.

Many pairs of Barn Owl have either not bred this year, or have been forced to abandon their broods due to poor vole availability in their hunting habitats, caused by the weather. Where pairs have been successful, eggs have been laid very late and brood sizes are small. G&B Bowman

The start of Barn Owl nest monitoring was around a month later this year than in 2017 but, interestingly, Barn Owl nesting in South-west England has gradually started earlier each year, and is now 4-6 weeks earlier than it was when I started monitoring nests 35 years ago. I try to coincide the start of my monitoring with the Barn Owlets reaching around four weeks of age, so that the parents are no longer roosting with them and they will have no idea that I have visited their nest. However, even allowing for the effects of the last cold snap running from mid March into April, to my surprise some Barn Owls were still on eggs in July, and I even found pairs at their nest sites which were still on the buildup to egg-laying. There were pairs with young, but at the start of monitoring every owlet was too young to ring, so this was going to be a long season.

In these initial stages of monitoring I was seeing a late start to the nesting season, but clutch sizes were good, with 5-6 eggs or young owlets. Clearly, nature was healing itself; voles were breeding well and the slow start to grass growth had now speeded up and things were getting back to normal.

But then farmers began cutting grass for hay and the heatwave really set in. We started to see a double whammy effect on prey populations, which really took its toll on the Barn Owl families. The grass cut came at the worst time for the babies which had hatched so late, because their food supply plummeted just when they needed it most, and then on top of that the prolonged hot, dry spell stopping grass from growing and, therefore, voles from breeding. Usually, the hay cut comes when young are at a much later stage of growth and more able to cope with a temporary drop in food, but because this year the cut was early and the hatch was late they were at a much more fragile stage in their development, and the drop in food lasted longer because grass regrowth was suppressed by the drought. The results were sadly unsurprising, and owlets began to starve. Many were eaten by older siblings, which is nature's way of ensuring at least some success from each nest.

All my farming friends say "we have to make hay while the sun shines", which is true of course, but those I work with every year also know the difference they can make by leaving uncut margins around their hay fields. And this year, more than ever, those margins were a lifeline. I appealed via social media to all farmers to leave as much of a rough-grassland margin as they could to create a vole reservoir and help restart the prey population once the rain came and cut grass started growing again. This seemed well received by a number of farmers who did leave edges, but the fact that there was no rain coming, and it became even hotter, meant that fields of cut grass were now parched and our green and pleasant land started to look more like a scene from a 'Spaghetti Western'.

When food is plentiful we clearly see the evidence due to food stores of uneaten prey stashed in nest boxes and fat, contented owlets snoozing the day away. What we've found most often this year is almost universally no food stores and either dead or missing owlets.

The story of this season is by no means over yet. As I write, at the end of July, I am still monitoring Barn Owl nests, and they are still at all stages of development. The Met Office have just issued a weather warning for more extreme heat to come, so the difficult times roll on. But nature always finds a way to fight back against the changing climate, just as long as there is enough habitat to sustain it. If the extremes continue to be a feature of our weather, then I'm sure the owls will adjust to compensate. All we must do is continue to create habitat and nest sites to give them a helping hand along the way, and they will do the rest.