

# Skomer Island Owls Factsheet



Barn Owl

There are three species of owl which have been recorded breeding on Skomer Island: the Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*), the Little Owl (*Athene noctua*) and the most common and most frequently seen, the Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*).

## Short-eared Owl

### Characteristics

The Short-eared Owl on Skomer hunts mainly at dusk except when they have young chicks during May and June and then the adults are active throughout the day as well, one of the great sights of the island.



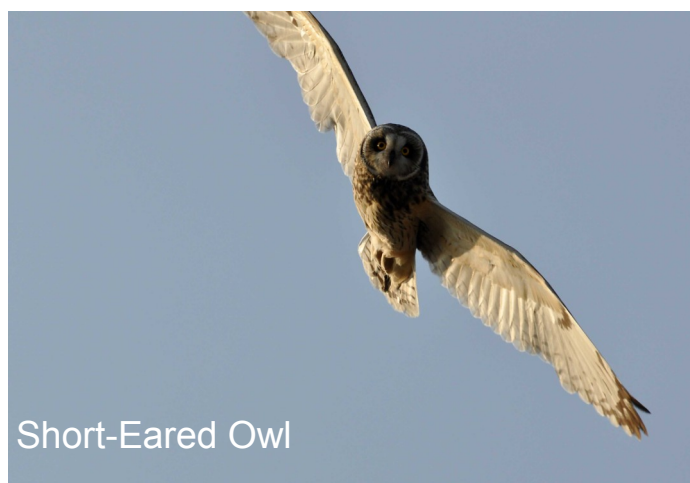
Little Owl

The adult Short-eared Owl is a long-winged owl (max 110cm) with dark wing tips and a prominent dark carpal patch on the underwing. The plumage is usually heavily streaked with brown on a white to yellow brown or pale ochre background but is very variable. The facial disc is a buff white with a dark edging and black patches around each of the rather baleful looking yellow eyes. The sexes only differ slightly, although most females have heavier markings on a deeper buff background colour especially on the underbody. It is usually the light coloured males which fly over the territories during the daytime. The newly fledged juvenile is a deep mahogany brown with heavy black streaking and a dark facial disc, but these characteristics are soon lost and the first winter owl is often paler than the adults with indistinct streaking on the body.

## Watching owls

The owls are most likely to be seen flying steadily to and fro across North Valley and near Gorse Hill to the south of the farm. They sometimes perch on a rock outcrop or wall although they prefer to sit on the ground and peer over the top of the vegetation. During the fledging period when the pressure to provide for a large family is intense they range outside their nesting territories to hunt and can then be seen almost anywhere on Skomer.

The owls eat their prey whole, head first, and any of the indigestible remains are ejected in the form of a pellet with the grey fur forming a protective cushion around the small sharp bones. When the chicks are very young the adults tear the prey up into small pieces but soon leave the youngsters with whole items with which they rapidly learn how to deal.



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## Feeding

Skomer has good populations of the Wood Mouse and the unique Skomer Vole. An owl eats two or three mammals per day and it has been estimated that they account for about a third of the mice or voles on the island each year. Other prey includes beetles, young Rabbits, small birds, even Lizards and Frogs. The abundance of small mammals and the lack of any ground predators is of course the main reason why the Short-eared Owl breeds so successfully on Skomer.



Hunting Short-Eared Owl by Steve Burnett

## Breeding and nesting

Skomer is one of the most important breeding sites for the Short-eared Owl in southern Britain. Usually between one and four pairs nest each year, up to a fifth of the Welsh population, but in 1993 there was an unprecedented 14 pairs which reared 32 chicks and the following year eight or nine pairs reared almost as many.

In April courtship flights at dusk are commonplace but the owls are sometimes seen during the day. During June birds can frequently be seen hunting for food throughout the day and will almost ignore the quiet human observer. The situation changes dramatically once the chicks fledge and by the end of July very few owls are seen on the island. The adults are in moult and are much less active during daylight hours while the juveniles apparently leave the island.

The Short-eared Owl is thought to be monogamous but not necessarily faithful either to its partner or nest site in subsequent years. On Skomer in 1988 one male is thought to have mated with two females and have raised two broods in nests just 20 metres apart.

The nest is a shallow scrape on the ground, lined with any available vegetation from just outside the nest area. Between four and eight smooth, dull white, elliptical eggs are laid at daily intervals and incubation starts with the first egg which means that the chicks also hatch at daily intervals. This usually means that the largest owlets survive even if food is short but in a good season all of the chicks might fledge.

The female takes a greater share of the nest duties and does all the incubating which takes about 26 days. During this period she will fly to the male and perch a few metres from the nest and accept a food item or he will overfly the site and drop the food in from above. Both the male and the female feed the young.

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The grey fluffy owlets are blind at first, their eyes open at about nine days old, they are then fed in the nest until they leave at between 12 and 17 days. After fledging they scatter over an area of between 50 and 200 metres from the nest site. On evenings in July the dispersed chicks can be seen on top of grass tussocks or balanced precariously on heather bushes loudly hissing to attract the parents' attention for food.

From about 12 days onwards the chicks can consume up to four voles a day and will continue at this rate (provided that the adults' hunting success allows) until 35 days old when they are able to fly and catch food for themselves.

If danger threatens the chicks the adults will fly overhead, hover, bark agitatedly 'chef, chef, chef' and sometimes swoop down. Meanwhile the chicks feign dead even when picked up or, when they are older, take on an aggressive stance, snapping their beaks and fluffing themselves up to look much bigger. Those chicks that survive could be back on territories a year later, the male wing clapping and barking in defence of his territory, the female being courted and cajoled into another seasonal partnership.

Photographs by Dave Boyle, Brian Hewitt, Mel Lewis

