

= Little owl =

The little owl (*Athene noctua*) is a bird that inhabits much of the temperate and warmer parts of Europe , Asia east to Korea , and north Africa . It was introduced into Britain at the end of the nineteenth century and into the South Island of New Zealand in the early twentieth century .

This owl is a member of the typical or true owl family , Strigidae , which contains most species of owl , the other grouping being the barn owls , Tytonidae . It is a small , cryptically coloured , mainly nocturnal species and is found in a range of habitats including farmland , woodland fringes , steppes and semi @-@ deserts . It feeds on insects , earthworms , other invertebrates and small vertebrates . Males hold territories which they defend against intruders . This owl is a cavity nester and a clutch of about four eggs is laid in spring . The female does the incubation and the male brings food to the nest , first for the female and later for the newly hatched young . As the chicks grow , both parents hunt and bring them food , and the chicks leave the nest at about seven weeks of age .

Being a common species with a wide range and large total population , the International Union for Conservation of Nature has assessed its conservation status as " least concern " .

= = Description = =

The little owl is a small owl with a flat @-@ topped head , a plump , compact body and a short tail . The facial disc is flattened above the eyes giving the bird a frowning expression . The plumage is greyish @-@ brown , spotted , streaked and barred with white . The underparts are pale and streaked with darker colour . It is usually 22 centimetres (8 @.@ 7 in) in length with a wingspan of 56 centimetres (22 in) for both sexes , and weighs about 180 grams (6 @.@ 3 oz) .

The adult little owl of the most widespread form , the nominate *A. n. noctua* , is white @-@ speckled brown above , and brown @-@ streaked white below . It has a large head , long legs , and yellow eyes , and its white ? eyebrows ? give it a stern expression . Juveniles are duller , and lack the adult 's white crown spots . This species has a bounding flight like a woodpecker but the rounded wingtips and general appearance of the birds are quite different .

The call is a querulous kiew , kiew . Less frequently , various whistling or trilling calls are uttered . In the breeding season , other more modulated calls are made , and a pair may call in duet . Various yelping , chattering or barking sounds are made in the vicinity of the nest .

= = Distribution and habitat = =

The distribution is widespread across Europe , Asia and North Africa . Its range in Eurasia extends from the Iberian Peninsula and Denmark eastwards to China and southwards to the Himalayas . In Africa it is present from Mauritania to Egypt , the Red Sea and Arabia . The bird has been introduced to New Zealand , and to the United Kingdom , where it has spread across much of England and the whole of Wales .

This is a sedentary species which is found in open countryside in a great range of habitats . These include agricultural land with hedgerows and trees , orchards , woodland verges , parks and gardens , as well as steppes and stony semi @-@ deserts . It is also present in treeless areas such as dunes , and in the vicinity of ruins , quarries and rocky outcrops . It sometimes ventures into villages and suburbs . In the United Kingdom it is chiefly a bird of the lowlands , and usually occurs below 500 m (1 @,@ 600 ft) . In continental Europe and Asia it may be found at much higher elevations ; one individual was recorded from 3 @,@ 600 m (12 @,@ 000 ft) in Tibet .

= = Behaviour and ecology = =

The owl usually perches in an elevated position ready to swoop down on any small creature it notices . It feeds on prey such as insects and earthworms , as well as small vertebrates including amphibians , reptiles , birds and mammals . It may pursue prey on the ground and it caches surplus food in holes or other hiding places . A study of the pellets of indigestible material that the birds

regurgitate found mammals formed 20 to 50 % of the diet and insects 24 to 49 % . Mammals taken included mice , rats , voles , shrews , moles and rabbits . The birds were mostly taken during the breeding season and were often fledglings , and including the chicks of game birds . The insects included Diptera , Dermaptera , Coleoptera , Lepidoptera and Hymenoptera . Some vegetable matter (up to 5 %) was included in the diet and may have been ingested accidentally .

The little owl is territorial , the male normally remaining in one territory for life . However the boundaries may expand and contract , being largest in the courtship season in spring . The home range , in which the bird actually hunts for food , varies with the type of habitat and time of year . If a male intrudes into the territory of another , the occupier approaches and emits its territorial calls . If the intruder persists , the occupier flies at him aggressively . If this is unsuccessful , the occupier repeats the attack , this time trying to make contact with his claws . In retreat , an owl often drops to the ground and makes a low @-@ level escape . The territory is more actively defended against a strange male as compared to a known male from a neighbouring territory ; it has been shown that the little owl can recognise familiar birds by voice .

This owl becomes more vocal at night as the breeding season approaches in late spring . The nesting location varies with habitat , nests being found in holes in trees , in cliffs , quarries , walls , old buildings , river banks and rabbit burrows . A clutch of three to five eggs is laid (occasionally two to eight) . The eggs are broadly elliptical , white and without gloss ; they measure about 35 @.@ 5 by 29 @.@ 5 mm (1 @.@ 40 by 1 @.@ 16 in) . They are incubated by the female who sometimes starts sitting after the first egg is laid . While she is incubating the eggs , the male brings food for her . The eggs hatch after twenty @-@ eight or twenty @-@ nine days . At first the chicks are brooded by the female and the male brings in food which she distributes to them . Later , both parents are involved in hunting and feeding them . The young leave the nest at about seven weeks , and can fly a week or two later . Usually there is a single brood but when food is abundant , there may be two . When the young disperse , they seldom travel more than about 20 kilometres (12 mi) . Pairs of birds often remain together all year round and the bond may last until one partner dies .

The little owl is partly diurnal and often perches boldly and prominently during the day . If living in an area with a large amount of human activity , little owls may grow used to humans and will remain on their perch , often in full view , while people are around . The little owl has a life expectancy of about sixteen years . However , many birds do not reach maturity ; severe winters can take their toll and some birds are killed by road vehicles at night , so the average lifespan may be in the order of three years .

= = Status = =

A. noctua has an extremely large range . It has been estimated that there are between 560 thousand and 1 @.@ 3 million breeding pairs in Europe , and as Europe equates to 25 to 49 % of the global range , the world population may be between five million and fifteen million birds . The population is believed to be stable , and for these reasons , the International Union for Conservation of Nature has assessed the bird 's conservation status as being of " least concern " .

= = In human culture = =

Owls have often been depicted from the Upper Palaeolithic onwards , in forms from statuettes and drawings to pottery and wooden posts , but in the main they are generic rather than identifiable to species . The little owl is , however , closely associated with the Greek goddess Athena and the Roman goddess Minerva , and hence represents wisdom and knowledge . A little owl with an olive branch appears on a Greek tetradrachm coin from 500 B.C. and in a 5th @-@ century B.C. bronze statue of Athena holding the bird in her hand . The call of a little owl was thought to have heralded the murder of Julius Caesar . The genus name , *Athene* commemorates the goddess , whose original role as a goddess of the night might explain the link to an owl . The species name *noctua* has , in effect , the same meaning , being the Latin name of an owl sacred to Minerva , Athena 's Roman counterpart .

In 1992 , the little owl appeared as a watermark on Jaap Drupsteen ' s 100 guilder banknote for the Netherlands .