

Little Owl Food 1936-37

Title

Little Owl Food Enquiry 1936-1937

Description and Summary of Results

The Little Owl *Athene noctua* was introduced into Great Britain in the latter part of the 19th Century and had spread quite widely by the 1930s. So much so that it was coming under scrutiny from some landowners and others because of the perception that it was preying on chicks of game birds and hence causing economic harm. However a study which had analysed pellets and gizzards from some estates in Hampshire had found that the main food was insects, voles and mice but it was not certain whether this was local or more general. Accordingly, in 1935, the BTO decided to undertake a thorough investigation of the economic status of the species, the most important part of which was to examine in some detail its food and feeding habits; and in order to discover the bird's present economic status, it was thought essential to restrict evidence to what was proved about it during the period of the investigation. This was particularly as some reports were suggesting that, by 1935, it had become considerably less numerous in some districts than it had been a few years previously, and with possible consequences for its food preferences.

For the general investigation 73 helpers sent in material to be analysed from 81 localities in 34 counties. Material included pellets, nest and larder remains and gizzards – with all but a very few getting material from known haunts. This resulted in 2460 pellets, material from 76 nests and holes and the gizzard contents of 28 individuals.

In spite of special appeals being made to them, people interested in game took part only to a very small extent. Accordingly a more specific investigation was arranged for the nesting season of 1937 which consisted largely of the examination of the gizzards of Little Owls shot on game estates.

The main findings confirmed that the species is chiefly crepuscular and nocturnal, is primarily a ground feeder with the main food at all times being rodents and insects. Carrion was taken very rarely and there was no evidence to show that the Little Owl was in any way a menace to other species of owls. Other birds were an important food constituent during the nesting season, in particular Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*, House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, Blackbird *Turdus merula* and Song Thrush *T. philomelos*, but there was very little evidence of nest raiding and there were no records of eggs being eaten. Game chicks were taken very rarely, although there were reports that locally occasional birds seemed to acquire a tendency to take these.

The conclusions were that the Little Owl was not a major menace to game bird chicks, although it certainly took some, and therefore did not cause any significant economic damage.

Methods of Data Capture

Food remains from the bird, derived from every possible source and from all areas, were examined and analysed on a large scale – pellets, food remains from around known haunts,

and gizzards from shot birds. All animals represented among the food remains were counted and collected for future reference.

The Inquiry was restricted to field work, carried out in close touch with laboratory work, covering a period of one and a half years and including two nesting seasons. All preconceived ideas about food and feeding habits were excluded.

There were two parts: 1) a general investigation for a full year, from February 1936 to 1937; and 2) a special game-chick and poultry investigation from March to 10 July 1937. Fieldworkers volunteered their help mainly in response to an appeal from the Trust, a broadcast by the BBC and an article in the Zoo magazine. They were asked to send in pellets, food remains collected from around known nests or roost sites and the gizzards of any birds shot or found dead.

The laboratory work of analysing the pellets and other samples sent in was done by the organiser. An extremely close and particular search was made, with the help of a microscope and reagents, for possible hidden traces of game or poultry chicks.

Purpose of Data Capture

To determine the food and feeding habits of the Little Owl to determine whether or not it was an economic threat especially to game birds.

Geographic Coverage

All of England and Wales.

Temporal Coverage

The main investigation was February 1936 to February 1937 and the more specific followed this through the breeding season of 1937.

Other Interested parties

Several individuals gave specialist help with the identification of remains in the pellets.

Organiser(s)

Alice Hibbert-Ware

Current Staff Contact

archives@bto.org

Publications

The main report of the survey is:

Hibbert-Ware, A. 1937-1938. Report of the Little Owl food Inquiry 1936-37. *British Birds* 31: 162-187; 205-229; 249-264.

An associated paper is:

Hibbert-Ware, A. 1936. An investigation of the food of captive Little Owls. *British Birds* 29: 302-305.

These publications were later published (1938) separately in slightly revised form as an illustrated booklet.

The survey was noticed in *BTO Annual Report* numbers 2, 3 and 4 (a major summary); and in *BTO Bulletin* numbers 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

None.

Computer data -- outline contents

N/A.

Computer data -- description of contents

N/A.

Information held in BTO Archives

1 box containing pellets and specimens, and some correspondence. The diaries are thought to have been in the archives, but seem to have disappeared around 2004-05.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

Specific Issues for Analysis