

# Relocating the owls

Being the final group of birds to leave the Sanctuary, this was always going to be a very emotional move for me. The owls, quite used to change around the Sanctuary (provided it didn't directly involve their aviary), had looked on with interest as each aviary around them came down, was labelled up and shipped off around the country by trailer.

Having moved different types of owl previously, and knowing personally each owl in the aviary, I know exactly their requirements for space, who will share a box, and who needs their own space. I am also acutely aware of the effects of an owl overheating having had on several occasions to revive a nearly dead one due to people bringing them to us in a poorly or over-ventilated box

This was never going to be a quick journey - we're talking a 5½ to 6 hour drive. I had to make sure that ALL eventualities were covered, well in advance.

Firstly, did we have enough carriers? Yes, we had plenty - but it was through careful selection to ensure I had the correct type for the owls. Then I had to ensure they were all the correct size, both internally for the owls, and externally so they would fit into the Land Rover (thank goodness I had changed it for a bigger one 2½ years ago), with enough room around each box for my fresh air system to circulate the air around. Then, the windows would have to be darkened in case it was a sunny day. I had considered transporting them at night, but they would then have been restless, knowing it was 'their daytime', so that was discounted. I hadn't wanted to tint the windows, as I wanted the option to open the rear sliding windows, which would then have removed the tinting effect. Some deep thought and searches for screening items on the internet, and I decided on fly netting triple layered - dark enough to give the shade and privacy required, but airy enough for the ventilation to work ..... a van just doesn't give you these options.

I had been to the Barn Owl Trust a couple of times previously, and always been impressed by the quality of their work, and their determination to overcome the odds when things get tough (as they often do with wild bird welfare work). After sorting out with them for taking on the owls, there would be a gap of several months before they would have things ready to receive them, and it was whilst clearing some of the barns I came across a pile of 'as new' stacking chairs which had seen little use. I recalled seeing an appeal on their Website for such and got in touch to see what else they required, and what else I could pass on....

Subsequently, it was during this 'waiting period' that I made my first trip down to Devon, taking two huge chest freezers, the pile of stacking chairs, and half of the roosting boxes from the owl aviary (all the good, nearly new ones). It was certainly a full load.

An uneventful journey down - reduced speed from the days when I used to drive to Penzance and back in a day (when relocating sea birds to Mousehole Bird Sanctuary ready for staged release) - and better fuel economy than I could have imagined from a very full roofrack, Land Rover and trailer.

I was made very welcome upon my arrival, and shown where the new aviary was going, and everyone pitched in to help unload the 'goodies', then all too soon it was off to the B&B for some tea... I was exhausted.

The following day, another uneventful drive back, noting well in each direction where the best stop-offs were, where I would be able to park and keep the vehicle safe, secure, and in the shade if need be.

The day before I was due to take the owls was full of preparation; fitting the window screens, checking the orientation of the boxes and checking and rechecking the airflow system. All was set. The large fence at the front had already been taken down, and a much smaller one now sits in its place. The original gateway has been re-instated, and so I was able to take the vehicle right up to the aviary for easy loading, to minimise any stress for the birds - though I knew they would settle quickly once we were all in and underway.

At this point, I would like to thank both Len and John; who both offered to help me catch and box the owls. But as I wanted to do it swiftly, without upsetting them, and be able to check each bird as I boxed it (and make sure certain ones did/didn't travel together), I opted to do it all on my own.

The owls knew something was happening, as birds have the keenest of senses, but they each trusted me implicitly, and I was able to pick each bird up without use of nets or gloves, examine it and place it in one of the carriers, which I had lined up ready.

Once all in carriers (43 Tawny's and 2 Barn Owls), they were carefully stowed in their respective positions in the back of the Land Rover. The air system checked once more, then it was goodbye to Len and we were off down the road.

At no point was this to be an easy journey, but it was a necessary one. Sure enough, by the time we turned onto the main road, all owls had settled down at the sound of my voice. The weather forecast earlier in the week had threatened a scorching hot day, but Mother Nature was looking after us on that journey, and the majority of the time was cloud and sunny spells, interspersed with the odd heavy shower - perfect

Only at one point just as I joined the M6 did my constitution waver, and I had to pull over briefly to recompose myself, refocus, and concentrate in the job in hand - to get my children safely down to their new home, where I had organised a super new home for them all - keeping them together for the rest of their lives.

There were a couple of delays on the way down, none that caused us any problems, but I was acutely aware that people were staying on at the Barn Owl Trust in order to assist when I arrived. I kept the BOT regularly updated with revised arrival times, and eventually we rolled up about 3.45pm.

I received a wonderful welcome upon arrival; people seemed to come from all areas to help, and we were soon quickly unloading the Land Rover, and formed a chain to pass all the carriers swiftly into the aviary.

Each owl was checked when it was removed from the carrier, and certain owls needing extra care or of extreme age were rung so that the staff down there could identify them easily without disturbing the other owls. I was pleased to see that all had gone smoothly, no one had suffered at all (most had slept all the way down), and even Boss Owl - who is the only temperamental one - seemed quite placid when she was released into the aviary.

My previous visit to bring the owl roosting boxes down paid dividends instantly - the owls recognised them straight away and settled down without issue. There was a bit of confusion at first with the swinging perch, but I could see as time went on, that this was going to be a great attraction for some, whereas others preferred a static branch!

The owls had received a double feed for four days prior to the trip down, this was to ensure they could go for a few days without food whilst they settled in, and also so they would not be at all hungry on the day of the journey, as they would not be fed until the evening. This had been accepted without question - as ever, there was such a bond between us, as with all the birds, and they trusted me implicitly.

After several gorgeous cups of coffee, provided by Frances and David Ramsden, along with a personal guided tour throughout the grounds of the Trust, I was doubly touched when they offered to take me out for a meal and after some thought we went to the B&B where I stopped once more, as I was totally shattered at this point and it would save me driving anywhere afterwards.

It was lovely to talk to similarly engaged people on a level where many others might get bored, but we chatted about our similar work late into the evening. Thank you for that Frances and David - it meant great deal.

After the meal, we parted company and it was a somewhat restless night I endured, a great shame as the place was superb and gave a heavily discounted rate knowing who and why I was there (Furzeleigh Mill Country House).

The return journey was as uneventful as the car was empty; thankfully the Trust had asked if I could spare any of the carriers, and so I was happy to give them all up safe in the knowledge they would be used in the future for helping save birds lives. With the screening taken down, and the interior carrier-free, it was as near-normal a journey as I could muster.

Many people have asked how I have found the strength to continue, and despite everything keep others spirits up... well, it's certainly not been easy, nor does it get easier as the days pass, but I do keep busy and keep helping birds and people, and so get by day by day. We can plan ahead, but should only try to accomplish a day at a time.

**Pars maior lacrimas ridet et intus habet** - *You smile at your tears but have them in your heart.*

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Frances Ramsden from The Barn Owl Trust has written us a lovely report about their part in helping Three Owls in our hour of need;

The Barn Owl Trust and Three Owls have been exchanging newsletters and information for over ten years and Nigel first visited the Barn Owl Trust in 2006. It was something of a shock when Nigel rang in February last year to tell us Three Owls was closing its hospitals and aviaries and he asked us to help re-home over 40 Tawny Owls that he really wanted to keep together. Our first reaction was that providing suitable accommodation for so many birds was out of the question but after several emails and phone calls we decided that by demolishing two old aviaries and building a really big one we could provide a home. At the end of September with the old aviaries gone and the groundworks completed we had a team of apprentices from Western Power Distribution here for four days. They did a fabulous job of constructing the new "des res" for the birds. With just a week between the apprentice project and the owls arriving our staff swung into action to provide the finishing touches, taps for the baths, a feeding table, roosting boxes and a long swinging perch for the birds. On the 8th October Nigel arrived with 43 Tawnies and 2 Barn Owls, the birds between 19 -35 years old, had all lived together for years. It was amazing as he brought box after box into the aviary where the birds were all checked over before being released into their new home. The swinging perch proved a great success although there was initially some consternation amongst the birds already on it when another one landed and it started to move. Nigel had delivered nine roosting boxes on a previous visit and the owls that couldn't get on the perch immediately recognised them and settled in to watch the rest of the proceedings. Within a very short time all of the birds were settled and when we looked around it was incredible to see 45 sets of eyes staring at us - an incredible experience. After the move it took a few days for all of them to start eating much as Nigel had told us they would, but within a week they were eating, bathing and hardly bothering to open an eye when people walked past or went into feed them or clean their baths.

One thing we found extremely surprising was how quiet the birds were. Our own resident Tawnies are incredibly vocal and we had expected the same from the new arrivals. It wasn't until well into 2011 that we heard a hoot out of them and then often during the middle of the day. The Barn Owls took to one of the most secluded roosting boxes but the Tawnies tend to line up on the swinging perch or group together in roosting boxes that give them a good view of the passing world. Of course this makes them very easy to see and demonstrates beautifully the colour, plumage and size variations in a group of birds that at first glance look very similar.

We had a particularly cold and snowy winter here in Devon and in February we lost the first of the Tawnies which was found dead under one of the roosting boxes. A second Tawny died in May - with a group of such elderly birds this is only to be expected. The other 41 Tawnies and 2 Barn Owls appear to be enjoying life in the Devon countryside, several of them were seen sunbathing yesterday. It's certainly been a pleasure having them here. Thank you to Nigel and all at Three Owls for freezers, chairs, pet carriers and a donation to make it possible for us to take on the owls, we are delighted to be able to provide them with sanctuary to live out the rest of their days. The Barn Owl Trust would love to hear from anyone who would like to continue to support the 41 Tawny Owls and 2 Barn Owls now living here at the Trust by joining our adoption scheme or giving a donation. Details can be found on our website, [www.barnowltrust.org.uk](http://www.barnowltrust.org.uk). Thank you.

Frances Jaine Ramsden

Trustee

Barn Owl Trust

