

# Anyone Want a Barn Owl?

**Of course you do.**

They're beautiful birds, not too big, gentle expressions, a bit of a novelty ("Hey. I've got a Bird of Prey!") and so cheap.

**But!**

There are about 30,000 captive barn owls in Britain at the moment. A number that increases each year. Many of these birds are kept in appalling conditions by people who have absolutely no idea how to look after them. There are between 3,000 and 5,000 pairs of barn owls left in the wild and the numbers keep falling!

**Worrying, isn't it?**

## WHY DO YOU WANT IT?

If you're looking for a pet, get a hamster or a cat, so much easier to look after and the whole family can enjoy it! If you want something you can boast about in the pub, then you probably aren't the right sort of person to have ANY bird of prey.

If you want a cage bird there are other, far more appropriate, birds to choose from.

If you want one because you think they're cute, think again. Barn owls are predators - the product of millions of years of evolution culminating in near-perfect killing machines. The facial disk which we find so appealing is a reflector which channels the slightest sound towards a pair of incredibly effective ears, able to pinpoint the sound of small prey animals over enormous distances. The large, forward-facing eyes enable it to see its prey in light levels which would leave us bouncing off walls. The soft plumage has evolved to allow the owl to fly silently, partly to avoid giving any warning sounds to its prey and partly to prevent wind noise from interfering with its sensitive hearing.

The only sensible reason to keep a barn owl is to

**FLY IT!**

# ARE BARN OWLS CHEAP?

Well, if you're just looking at the cost of the bird, yes they are. You can buy one for less than the price of a decent pair of shoes!

The trouble is that the cost of the bird is only a tiny fraction of the total that you'll have to spend if you're going to do it properly.

## Let's look at the true costs.

**NB. The figures quoted here are intended as a realistic approximation only.**

## THE FIRST STEP

Before you even start looking for your bird

### Find out what's involved!

The only sensible way of doing this is to go on a course.

We've heard of people trying to teach themselves from a book.

Yes, books are a useful reference source but they're no substitute for hands-on experience and the opportunity to discuss the ins and outs with a skilled falconer. You'll also find that the contacts that you make on the course will be invaluable when the inevitable problems crop up.

**COST - £180.00**

Look on the bright side.

You may find out that you just aren't cut out for it (let's face it, gutting and de-yolking day-old chicks isn't everyone's cup of tea) and, whilst you'll end up paying for the experience of a lifetime, at least you'll be able to cut your losses before the serious spending begins!

# BASIC EQUIPMENT

The amount of gear that you'll need just to get started is quite frightening. Some of it is fairly obvious - if you've ever watched a bird of prey demonstration, you can't have missed seeing much of it. However, the glove, leash, jesses, creance and swivel are only the beginning and you'll be amazed by the amount of extra equipment that will suddenly become vital just when you thought you'd got everything.

It is essential that you buy and use a good telemetry (radio tracking) system. Remember, your bird will be captive bred and won't have any idea how to survive in the wild. If you loose it you will certainly be sentencing it to a slow death by starvation if you fail to find it in time.

You'll also need a bath, a good set of special scales & weights, a freezer (unless you want to keep a supply of day-old chicks, mice and rats in with the beefburgers and frozen peas) not forgetting to lay on a supply of food

**BEFORE YOU GET YOUR BIRD.**

**COST - £750**

# ACCOMMODATION

The Raptor Trust recommends a minimum aviary size of 12' x 8' fitted out with perches and a nest box. The walls, mesh and flooring should be made of the appropriate materials. One absolute requirement is that no chicken wire or any other bare metal mesh must be used. Birds can suffer severe injuries by flying into such materials.

**(Details can be found in our Best Practice Guide - cost £5)**

The aviary itself must be situated well away from any rotting vegetation such as a compost heap (this includes anything your neighbour may have just over the fence)

Again, this must be built and fully fitted out BEFORE you get your bird.

**COST - £300**

One further point to bear in mind is that the aviary, no matter how well maintained will probably have to be replaced at some point during your bird's life so you are probably going to have to allow about £100 a year extra!

**TOTAL COSTS**  
**COURSE £180**  
**BASIC EQUIPMENT £750**  
**ACCOMMODATION £300**  
**GRAND TOTAL £1,230**

Plus, of course, £30 to £50 for the bird!

Maybe barn owls aren't so "cheap" after all.

## **BUT I WANT TO BREED THEM**

The good news is that it's fairly easy. A pair of barn owls, kept in decent conditions will almost certainly mate and you could find yourself stuck with an extra five birds each year.

### **The bad news is that it isn't a good idea!**

If you do it because you want to make money, you won't. There are so many available that it's a buyer's market. They won't even pay for their own board and lodging.

If you want to breed them for release, forget it. It's now illegal to release captive-bred barn owls without a licence. In the past too many people, with the best of motives, have released birds in entirely the wrong places and in the wrong way. The result has been the deaths of hundreds of owls, not only the ones released but also the resident birds that have suddenly been faced with introduced competition.

*If you really want to help barn owls, join the Raptor Trust or a similar organisation in your own area. Charities such as ours can do more for the long-term survival of these birds than any individual, no matter how well intentioned.*

## HAVE YOU GOT THE TIME?

Birds of prey soak up all your “spare” time.  
They need to be fed, trained, exercised and kept in clean conditions.  
Roughly speaking, looking after a bird of prey takes as much time and effort as tending a pony.

## HAVE YOU GOT THE LAND?

All Birds of Prey need regular exercise but they soon become so used to a single piece of land that you can have real problems if you ever need to fly somewhere else. Ideally, you should have five or six different places to fly  
WITH THE LAND-OWNERS' CONSENT.

## AND FINALLY!

If you still intend to buy one, just consider a few more aspects.

You should be looking to get a baby bird that you can hand rear and totally imprint (any non-imprinted owl is potentially dangerous and could be untrainable!).

This means constant care and feeding for several weeks. Are you prepared to get up in the middle of the night and cut up mice for your baby? And remember, what goes in at one end will eventually come out of the other!

Have you ever seen a baby barn owl?

It is one of the ugliest creatures in creation! It is also noisy, filthy and smelly. Will your family be prepared to suffer all of this for a month or so?