



Pellet Analysis

LEAFLET No 20

Reg. Charity No 299 835

This leaflet provides all the information you need to analyse Barn Owl pellets in order to determine the birds' diet.

What are owl pellets?

Many kinds of birds produce pellets including birds of prey, crows and even sparrows. Pellets consist of the indigestible parts of birds' food which are regurgitated (brought up through the beak). The diet of most wild Barn Owls consists mainly of small mammals such as voles, shrews and mice. Other less common food items include rats and occasionally birds and even frogs. Barn Owl pellets are made up of the fur and bones of the small mammals which the owl usually swallows whole. The pellets often accumulate at roosting sites and when analysed can be used as a good indicator of diet.

Pellet storage and preparation

When fresh, Barn Owl pellets are black and very moist. However, most of the pellets which are analysed are not fresh; they have lain around in a dry roost site for several months before being collected. During this time it is highly likely that clothes moths will have laid their eggs on the pellets and the larvae may be found in the pellets where they consume the hair before pupating into moths. If pellets are stored in a sealed container a number of small moths or grubs may be found when it is opened. They are completely harmless (except to wool).

Freshly collected pellets should be spread out on newspaper to dry before storing. If fresh or dried pellets are simply left in a bag the larvae will move repeatedly through the pellets causing them to become one congealed mass of pellet debris. The Barn Owl Trust stores pellets in an open box in a freezer. This kills the larvae and allows the pellets to dry and be stored indefinitely. If newly collected pellets are not being stored in a freezer they should be used within a week or dried and stored individually. Used 35mm plastic film pots (often available free of charge from chemists) are particularly good for this.

Pellet analysis

Pellets can be analysed either dry or wet. It is easiest, particularly for children, to analyse dry pellets. However, in order to extract all of the small mammal bones intact, pellets can be individually soaked in water for 24-48 hours (a small quantity of disinfectant can be

added to the water if you wish). It is much easier for pellets to be analysed using bare hands (especially if you have good finger nails). For people without good nails, or who are wearing disposable gloves, then tweezers, needles, or cocktail sticks may be helpful. Please follow basic hygiene procedures and wash your hands after touching pellets.

What to look for

The simplest way to identify which small mammals have been eaten is to search for the lower jaw bones (see overleaf). One large pellet may contain the remains of five or six mammals so it is a good idea to analyse each pellet separately and to "pair up" the right and left jaws from each pellet. Most jaws are found with the teeth in place - pull out the teeth to reveal the tooth root pattern (see overleaf). Field vole jaws and skulls soon become instantly recognisable (as do common shrew remains). Take care in separating various rodent species. Occasionally very unusual remains may be encountered such as mole, harvest mouse, or frog. Bird bones and even bird rings are occasionally found too. A Barn Owl pellet from Essex was once found to contain a BTO ring which had been fitted to a wren in Northumberland!

Barn Owl Trust 1989
latest revision 2001

The Barn Owl Trust is a registered charity dedicated to the conservation of the Barn Owl and its environment. You can become a **Friend of the Barn Owl Trust** and support our work by making a regular donation. **Friends** receive our biannual magazine *Feedback*, our Annual Report, a car sticker and a badge.

The Trust provides a wide range of free leaflets on Barn Owl related matters, which can be downloaded from our website -

www.barnowltrust.org.uk.

For further information about the Trust and its work, please write including a large SAE to the Barn Owl Trust, Waterleat, Ashburton, Devon TQ13 7HU.

Tel: 01364 653026

Email: info@barnowltrust.org.uk

Analysis

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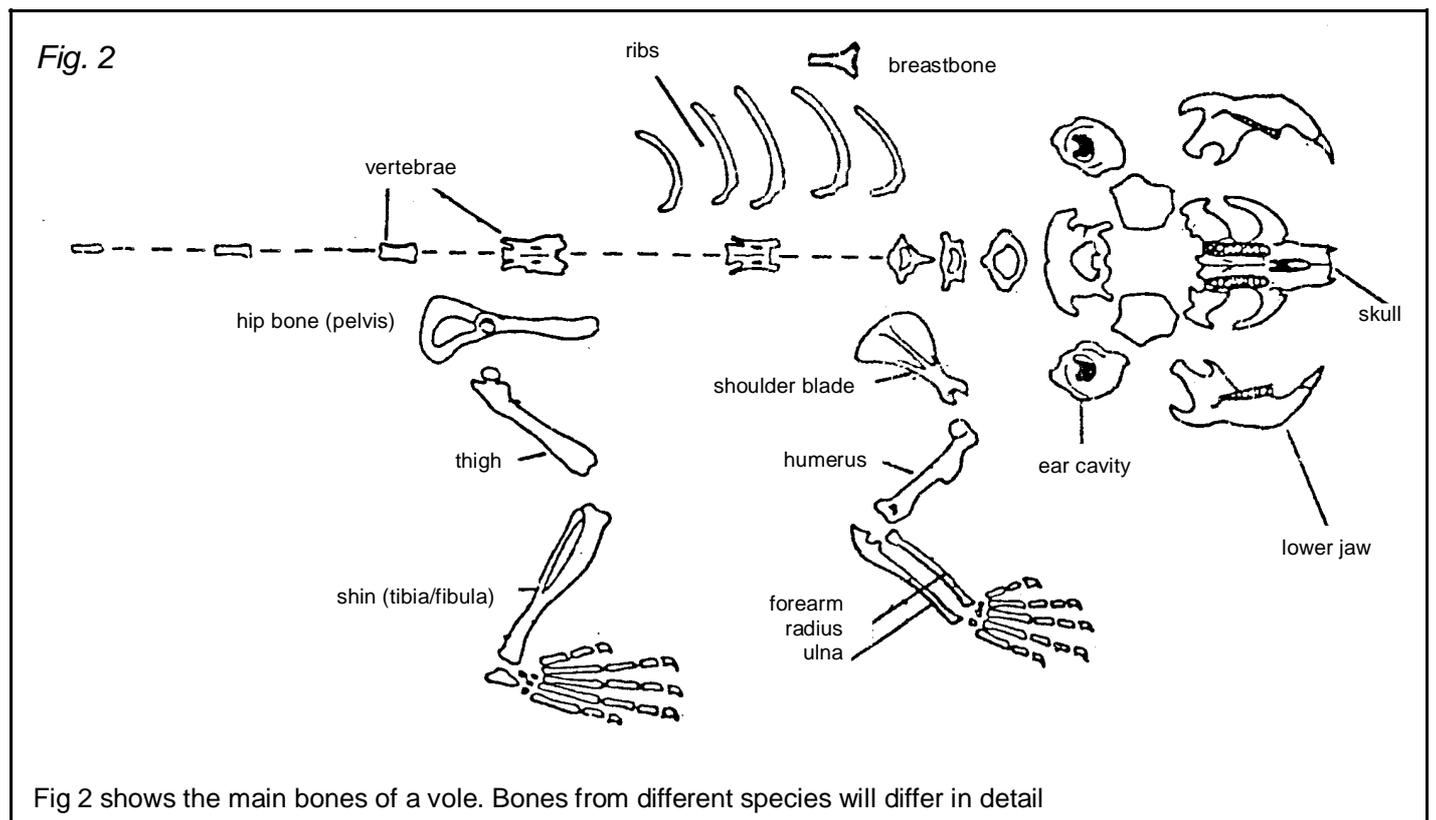
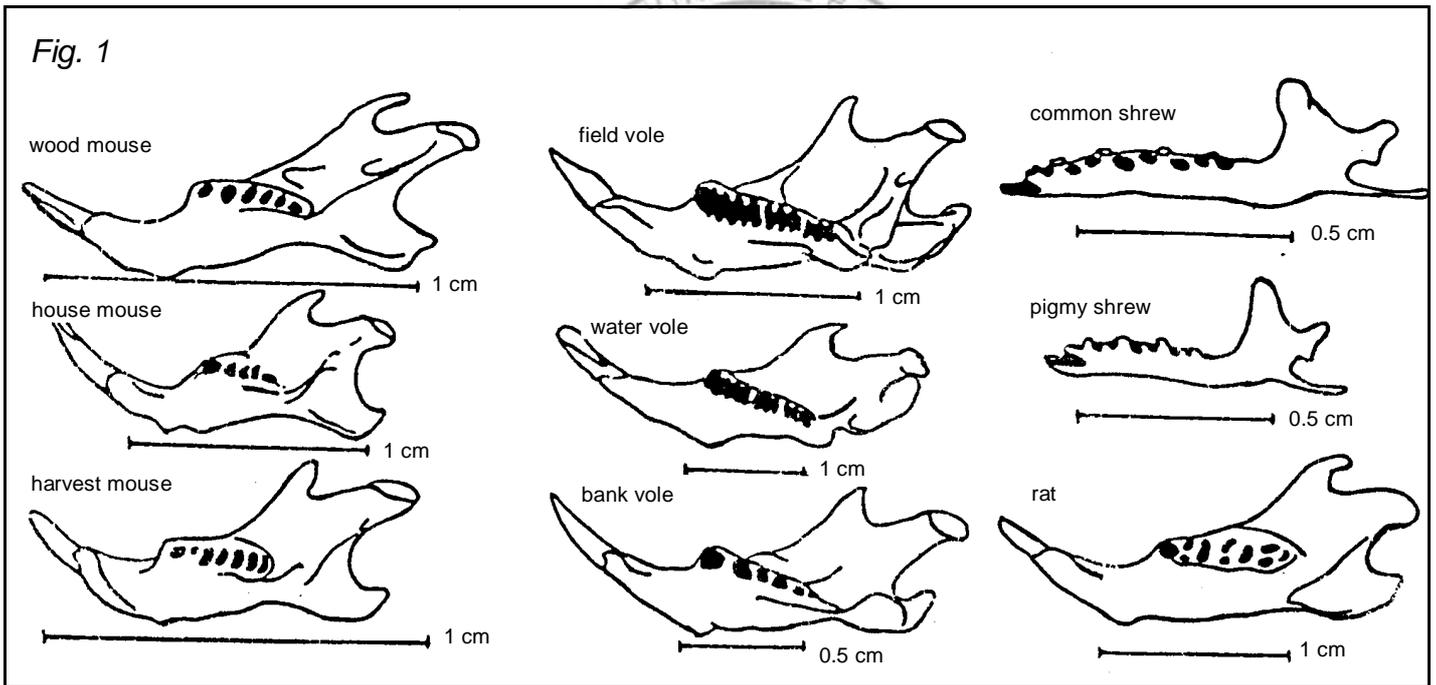


Fig 2 shows the main bones of a vole. Bones from different species will differ in detail

Restoring the Balance

We've lived side-by-side with Barn Owls for centuries. But in modern times wild Barn Owls have become increasingly rare - and the reasons are all man-made. The Barn Owl is a symbol of our relationship with the countryside: the decline of this beautiful bird reflects our attitude towards the environment. No species can prosper in isolation - not even human beings. All things are connected and if we lived in balance with nature then Barn Owls, and so much other wildlife, could thrive.

How you can help

You can help to conserve the Barn Owl by **Becoming a Friend** of the Trust and making an annual or monthly donation to support our work. If you are a UK tax payer and complete a simple **Gift Aid** declaration the Trust can reclaim the tax paid on your donation and significantly increase the value of your gift at no extra cost to you. Standing order and Gift Aid forms are provided below. Please consider paying by **Standing Order** as this greatly reduces our administration time and costs.

BECOMING A FRIEND

UK Friends: Individual £15; Family (same address) £20

Overseas Friends: Individual £20 (sterling); Family (same address) £25 (sterling)

Owlets: UK £15; Overseas £20. Owlets are Junior Friends. They receive a personal ID card, Feedback and goody bag. (If children are under 16, please state ages. One or more children from the same family at one address can be Owlets.)

Name(s) _____

Address _____ Postcode _____

Daytime telephone no _____ email address _____

I would like to become a Friend of the Trust and receive my Friend's pack - I enclose £ _____ * (see above)

I am pleased to enclose a donation of £ _____ *

*UK taxpayers please complete Gift Aid declaration below.

Sorry, donations of under £5 are not acknowledged without an SAE.

The contact details you submit on this form will be held by the Barn Owl Trust on a secure computer system and will not be passed on to any third party but may be used by the Trust in pursuit of its aims. Please let us know if you object to this.

GIFT AID DECLARATION

If you are a UK tax payer completing this Gift Aid form will enable the Trust to reclaim the tax paid on your donation, thereby increasing the value of your gift at no extra cost to yourself.

Full name _____

Address _____ Postcode _____

I want the Barn Owl Trust to treat all donations I make on or after the date of this declaration as Gift Aid donations until I notify you otherwise.

My signature _____ Date _____

Note: Please remember to tell us if you no longer pay an amount of income or capital gains tax equal to the tax we reclaim on your donations. Please contact our office if you have any queries.

STANDING ORDER FORM

Name _____ Date _____

Address _____ Postcode _____

Please pay £ _____ on the first day of each **month*/year*** (* delete one) starting in the month of _____

and a like sum on the same date each **month*/year*** until further notice to the account of

the Barn Owl Trust (a/c no. 1027812) at Lloyds Bank (sort code 30-98-69) 31 Fore Street, Totnes, Devon TQ9 5HH

My signature _____ Account Number _____

To the manager _____ Bank _____

Bank Address _____ Postcode _____

THIS STANDING ORDER REPLACES ANY EXISTING STANDING ORDERS FROM THIS ACCOUNT TO THE BARN OWL TRUST

Please fill in and sign the appropriate parts of this form and post it to:

The Barn Owl Trust, Waterleat, Ashburton, Devon TQ13 7HU

If you'd like to receive information by post, please tick the boxes below and enclose a large stamped addressed envelope:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sample of <i>Feedback</i> (our bi-annual newsletter) | <input type="checkbox"/> Fund-raising for the Barn Owl Trust |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leaving a legacy to the Barn Owl Trust | <input type="checkbox"/> Barn Owl Trust publications (full details also on our website) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Corporate sponsorship | <input type="checkbox"/> Barn Owl Trust sales goods (full details also on our website) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Barn Owl adoption
(full details also on our website) | <input type="checkbox"/> Consultancy/Site Assessment Service (full details also on our website) |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Give As You Earn |