

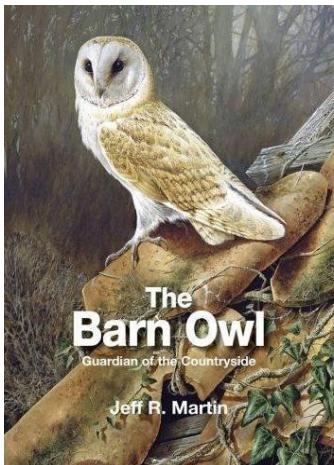
Book Review

The Barn Owl: Guardian of the Countryside

by Jeff R. Martin

Whittet Books, Stansted, Essex, United Kingdom, 2017.

Hardcover, 256 pp. RRP £stg33.



This book is largely Britain-focused in content and Anglo-centric in outlook. The author is a naturalist and a conservationist who is passionate about owls and their prey populations, and is apparently not a qualified ecologist, hence the book is popular rather than scientific. That can be a good thing, as it makes the book readable and appealing to a general readership, the necessary target audience if one

is trying to advocate for a better rural environment that accommodates wildlife.

The Introduction briefly reviews the knowledge base, status, regional gaps in knowledge and future prospects for the Barn Owl in Britain, and raises the question: At a time of failure to meet biodiversity targets (sounds familiar here in Australia!), are Barn Owls effective guardians of the countryside? The Barn Owl is globally the quintessential farmland owl, its fortunes in agricultural landscapes tied to farming practices in a world where agriculture is intensifying.

The remainder of the book is in three parts. Part 1 (two chapters) reviews the Barn Owl's evolutionary, taxonomic and nomenclatural history and global spread, describes its anatomy and physical characteristics (including flight, voice, sight and hearing), and speculates that it might have originated as a fishing owl. Part 2 (seven chapters) covers all pertinent aspects of the ecology, life history and behaviour of, and threats to, British Barn Owls and their prey and their habitats, as they relate to maintaining Barn Owl populations in Britain. They cover such things as the importance of, but loss of, grasslands, hedgerows and roost- and nest-sites (e.g. old trees and buildings), and the use of (with caveats) nest-boxes and captive breeding.

Part 3 (three chapters) is on the theme of 'Who will guard the guardians?' (a Latin quote from an ancient Roman satirist). It covers such things as agricultural poisons (including rodenticides and that new scourge of wildlife and bees—neonicotinoids or neonics), road traffic, general disturbance, urban expansion (all arising from human population growth) and superstitions about owls; the various implications of climate change and fluctuations in the weather; and concluding remarks on the Barn Owl's current status in Britain and Europe, some practical conservation measures (e.g. nest-boxes and study or

monitoring projects), and a vision for the future. Because Barn Owls and some other wildlife occur mostly on private land rather than reserves, and there is little government assistance for nature (again familiar to Australians!), the last section canvasses a scheme of wildlife-friendly farming methods focused in Barn Owl 'hotspots' with mixed habitats and farming enterprises, and technological solutions to for example road-kill, while emphasising the need to restore tree cover. The book does affirm that, with the proper approach, Barn Owls can continue to be the guardians of the British countryside, although their fate is in the hands of farmers.

The book is generously illustrated throughout with colour photographs of Barn Owls (ages, sexes, colour morphs), habitats, and prey animals and some other associated species, and a few graphs and tables. It concludes with an illustrated Appendix for sexing British Barn Owls on plumage characters; a list of scientific names mentioned; a list of useful contacts, websites and projects in Britain; references and bibliography; and an index.

The book is very comprehensive, and provides valuable lessons and suggestions for Australia, if only in broad general principles that could be applied as a model here. However, I have some minor quibbles with the author's understanding of certain concepts and terms, particularly in Part 1, in either the text or captions. For instance, on anatomy the terms tibia, fibula and 'tibula' [sic], and 'knees' (really the tibio-tarsal joint) and true knees, seem confused or muddled; taxon levels (family/species/subspecies) seem confused at times; the photograph of the 'Australian Barn Owl' is a Masked Owl; and there are typos in scientific names and in labelling of the owl skeleton. Chapter 2 claims that sexual dichromatism is absent in all other owls except the Snowy Owl, thus neglecting the Eastern Grass Owl and Masked Owl. The Snowy Owl's colour is said to "change from bird to bird [in response to] environmental conditions", whereas Barn Owls' colour differences "are sorted through genetics" although all such variation reflects natural selection acting on genes. Reference to Aliabadian *et al.* (2016) would have resolved the species/subspecies confusion. [And the consequent split into *Tyto alba* (Europe–Middle East–Africa), *T. furcata* (Americas) and *T. javanica* (including *stertens* and *delicatula* of Asia and Australia) almost parallels that of the African and Eastern Grass Owls, and requires reversion to *T. javanica* for our Barn Owls, cf. Debus *et al.* 2010.] Tapered wings do not confer greater manoeuvrability than rounded wings; we read "sonar sound recordings" for acoustic recordings; and "rectal bristles" are surely *rietal* (facial) bristles. In Chapter 5, hyperthermia should be hypothermia, and inter-/intraspecific and intra-guild (i.e. *inter*-specific) competition are muddled. I also found a few suggested explanations for

certain aspects (e.g. silent/audible flight, diurnal activity) rather too speculative or perhaps not fully cognisant of the relevant science. Finally, I find the modern compulsion to have an attempted witty or facetious chapter title or section heading at every turn rather irritating, infecting to the point of overkill our own *Australian Birdlife* magazine too. 'Catchy' phrases, albeit to engage laypeople, can be overdone and tiresome, and unconvincing proof of erudition.

I hesitate to criticise an enthusiastic amateur who has clearly researched his topic thoroughly, as well as having extensive field and practical conservation experience. The few minor 'rough edges' and scientific clangers notwithstanding, this book makes valuable reading for Australians concerned with conserving our Barn Owls and their habitats and prey in our farming regions, and indeed with fostering the ecologically sustainable and more aesthetically pleasing aspects of our farmscapes. It would especially appeal to Australian owl enthusiasts having British heritage.

References

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- Debus, S.J.S., Ley, A.J. & Rose, A.B. (2010). Diet of the Eastern Barn Owl *Tyto (javanica) delicatula* in Diamantina National Park, south-western Queensland, in 2008–2009. *Australian Field Ornithology* **27**, 179–183.

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