



SEARCHING FOR SHREWS

A joint project by the
Barn Owl Trust and the Mammal Society



Become an Owl Pellet Collector!

Searching for Shrews is a joint project by the Mammal Society and the Barn Owl Trust based on the collection and examination of Barn Owl pellets in order to detect an invasive species - the Greater White Toothed Shrew. This relatively large and boisterous shrew has only just arrived in Britain and is likely to negatively impact our native fauna so monitoring its distribution is really important. We may also discover new information about Barn Owls and their other prey!

Because you've already reported a Barn Owl roost or nest site, we're inviting you to regularly collect pellets, mainly during autumn and winter. How far you go and how often you collect them is entirely up to you. You will need to obtain the site owner or tenants' consent and it's a good idea to let them know, from time to time, how you are getting on. This page describes how to avoid disturbing the owls and what to do with the pellets before you send them to the Mammal Society. Once received, your pellets will be analysed by specially trained citizen science volunteers.

Pellet identification

Barn Owl pellets are about the size of your thumb (usually 3-7 cm long), dark grey or black, cylindrical and with rounded ends. Please visit [this webpage](#) to learn more about identifying Barn Owl pellets.

Collecting pellets and minimising disturbance

Nesting Barn Owls are legally protected against disturbance whilst at or near the nest. Their dependent young are also protected. Although most breeding attempts are started after March 1st and finished by August 31st, nesting has been recorded in every month of the year. Collecting Barn Owl pellets must always be done carefully.

- Only collect pellets that are on the floor. As long as you avoid elevated ledges or cavities you are most unlikely to disturb nesting owls.
- If you are collecting pellets from the floor of a busy building - somewhere that is frequently entered by people or vehicles- you can collect them at any time of year.
- If the building is seldom visited by anyone (where birds are not used to human activity), only go there between September 1st and February 28th and quietly collect pellets from the floor when the weather is not too wet or windy. Avoid all prolonged extreme weather events.
- If the site is a nestbox, a tree cavity, or any other small outdoor cavity, only approach the cavity between 1st September and 28th February. First check there are no live birds or other animals inside. If there are, leave well alone. If the cavity is empty and it is safe to do so, any pellets can be collected.
- If you are clearing out a nestbox that has become too full you can collect pellets while doing the job. Only clear out nestboxes between September and February and do the job in the evening when the weather is not too rainy or windy. First check that the birds are not nesting and that any owls present are unlikely to be dependant young.



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Collecting pellets and minimising disturbance (continued)

- If you have a licence to disturb nesting Barn Owls, then you may collect pellets while visiting nest sites under licence - as long as doing so does not prolong any disturbance.
- If you discover a Barn Owl site that could contain a nest between 1st March and 31st August and do not have a licence to disturb Barn Owls, then please leave quietly. You can return in Sept-Feb and please follow the guidelines above.
- Health and Safety – old buildings, old floors, and trees can be dangerous and falls are commonplace. Observe all relevant legislation (i.e. Risk Assessment and Working at Height). Avoid working alone and/or at least make sure someone knows where you are and when to expect you back. Know the guidance, know your limitations, and work within them.

How many pellets and how often

You can collect and send in any number of pellets from any number of visits to any number of sites anywhere in the UK. However, we are hoping that most volunteers will send in at least 50 pellets from each site they visit, twice a year. Barn Owl pellets are the most useful because none of the bone has been digested. Please don't send in pellets from other species.

Collection and storage

Pellets are usually collected in carrier bags. If the pellets are dry, simply tie a knot to seal the bag and post within 2 days. If they are wet, or you intend to keep the pellets longer than 2 days please – spread them out on newspaper or cardboard. Once completely dry, put them in a knotted carrier or zip bag and keep in a freezer until you are ready to post them.

Labelling and posting

Before you seal up the bag, put a label in that clearly states the date the pellets were collected, the place they were collected from (address, postcode, OS grid reference, or what3words), your name & email address or phone number. We don't need know the exact location of the Barn Owl site, although we may contact you to find out if we detect Greater White Toothed Shrew in your sample!

If you collect less than 50 pellets on your first visit and intend to get more, please put the labelled bag in a freezer. Add new pellets in a separate bag, with a separate label. Once you have at least 50 pellets in total, put the bag(s) of pellets in a cardboard box and post them to:

Please send your pellets to the following freepost address:
Freepost - MAMMALSOC

Thank you reading about *Searching for Shrews!*
science@themammalsociety.org



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Data Retention – all the information you provide will be retained by the Mammal Society according to its [Data Policy](#) and by the Barn Owl Trust according to its [Data Policy](#), not provided to any third party, nor used for any other purpose.

<https://www.barnowltrust.org.uk/sitemap/data-protection-policy/>

These guidelines were released in November 2023.