

OWL PELLETS - Q+A

BY NATASHA MURWILL

What is an owl pellet? How can they help monitor species? Here are a few answers to some of the most frequently questions asked about owl pellets in the UK and how you can help.

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WHAT ARE BIRD PELLETS? AND HOW ARE THEY MADE?

Pellets are masses of undigested food that has been stored in a bird's gullet and then regurgitated. In owls this often includes fur, bones and certain parts of invertebrates. But owls aren't the only ones to produce them - other birds of prey, gulls and birds in the crow family all produce pellets.

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ARE OWL PELLETS CLEAN?

Owl pellets are cleaner than you'd think. As they're the remains of animals that haven't been digested, they are a lot cleaner than what comes out the other end! I still tend to be cautious when handling them and wear gloves, as they can sometimes carry Salmonella. You can handle them without gloves, but I would strongly recommend thoroughly washing your hands afterwards. You can also sterilise your pellets by baking them in the oven wrapped in tinfoil, or by freezing them for 24 hours. These methods also kill any creepy-crawly eggs that may have been laid before you found them.

BARN OWL PELLETS



(c) Helen Bradshaw

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WHERE CAN YOU FIND OWL PELLETS?

The most common place to find owl pellets is under a known roost. This could be in a man-made structure (like a barn) or a large tree that has good perching/nesting spots. Owls thrive in places with good, stable populations of small mammals (especially voles).

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WHAT ARE YOU LIKELY TO FIND IN AN OWL PELLET?

Now this depends on the species. A little owl, for example, tends to produce small pellets which contain mainly invertebrates; beetle wing cases often give their pellets a shiny appearance. Barn owls, on the other hand, tend to have much larger pellets as their diet is predominantly small mammals and each pellet often holds the remains of at least 3-4 skeletons.

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WHAT METHODS CAN YOU USE TO DISSECT PELLETS?

When looking at owl pellets, there are two main methods of investigating – ‘Wet’ and ‘Dry’. The Wet method consists of soaking the pellets in water for 24 hours before gently peeling them apart, separating the bones from the fur. The Dry method is the same, except that you don’t soak the pellets beforehand. This method is used either when you are working with fresh pellets or have dried/baked them. The Dry method is faster and there is less chance of the pellets going mouldy. But the Wet method allows for a more in-depth look and reduces the chances of bones accidentally breaking as you pull the pellet apart.

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BARN OWL

7 WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

Be on the lookout for owl pellets, either around your property or when you're out for a walk. If you find one, please pass on the information to RECORD. This should include what bird species the pellet is from and, if you dissect it, what was inside. If you don't want to dissect it or want some help with identification, send us an email and we'll try to help: info@record-lrc.co.uk

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DO BARN OWLS HAVE A FAVOURITE FOOD?

Yes! Most of what you will find in a barn owl pellet is field voles. Up to 45% of the pellet can be this species, so you can see why it's important to have a sustainable population of voles in the area.

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WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT OWL PELLETS?

The Analysis on Owl Pellets by D.W.Yalden (Mammal Society Occasional Publications)
[The Barn Owl Trust Website](#)

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HOW DO I RECORD BIRD PELLETS?

If you know what species made the pellet, let us know, indicating that you've found a 'Pellet' in the 'Record Type'. If you dissect it, let us know what species bones you found. Make sure each species is a separate record to that for the pellet itself and make sure to add that the animal was dead and taken from a pellet

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