



# NOVEMBER ID CHALLENGE

## OWLS

**TOP TIP!**  
With good views, owl ID is reasonably easy. Long-eared and Short-eared Owls present the only real challenge

# ID tips & tricks

### TIME OF DAY

Owls have exceptionally acute hearing and brilliant eyesight, allowing them to hunt in the depth of night. Everyone knows that. But not all owls exclusively hunt in the dark. Most species come out to play in the crepuscular hours, but some will also seek prey in full sunshine. Knowledge of which species are likely to be seen in the daylight can be a very useful first clue to which species you are dealing with.

The owls most likely to be seen in full daylight are Barn Owl, Little Owl and Short-eared Owl. The first two are easy to identify (especially when you know they can be diurnal), but Short-eared Owl can be confused with the closely related Long-eared Owl. However, the latter species is rarely seen flying in the daytime, so that little bit of knowledge can be a useful (if not completely foolproof) first step to identification.

Of course, owls can be seen during the daytime at roost. For instance, Long-eared Owls in winter may roost communally in protected bushes and trees; and it is the way most birdwatchers get to see this elusive species. Even nocturnal species, such as Tawny Owl, may sometimes wake up, fly and even call and sing during the day. So, be aware and ready whenever you are walking through woodland in the daytime.



Short-eared Owls are one of the species that readily and frequently hunt in broad daylight, even bright sunshine

Barn Owls are birds of open country, hunting for small mammals in grass



### IMPORTANCE OF HABITAT

The comedian Harry Hill once did a routine about how the Tawny Owl is a bird of the woodland and the Barn Owl a bird of the barn and that the two should never invade the other's territory.

He was remarkably near the mark, as habitat is a vital first consideration in owl ID. Barn Owls do like to nest in barns (as well as hollow trees), with open country their favoured hunting habitat. Tawny Owls are almost invariably found in or very close to woodland.

Long-eared Owls are also woodland birds, but will hunt rough grassland near their woodland roosting and breeding habitat. Short-eared Owls are largely birds of open country, shunning any woods except very young plantations. An eared owl seen hunting in open country at early dusk or even in the day is more likely to be a Short-eared than a Long-eared.

Little Owls like a variety of farmland and parkland type of habitat.

One other thing to consider is that our most numerous owl, the Tawny, does not occur on the island of Ireland.

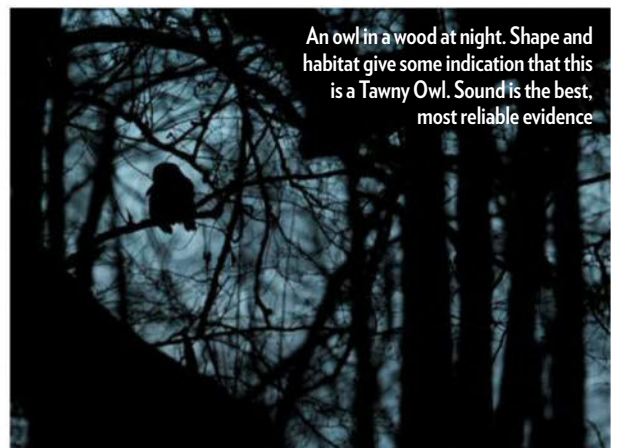
### NIGHT LISTENING

There are some birdwatchers who don't give a hoot about bird sounds. However, when night-time comes around and all you can see is poorly defined shapes, silhouettes or the anomalous hand in front of your face, how are you going to identify birds? There are only five regular British owls, so there is no excuse for not learning some of their most common calls.

Only Tawny Owls do the long wavering hoots. They also have a 'keevick' call. Little Owls have a series of almost Tawny-like yelps. Long-eared Owls have soft short hoots, deep in the male and rather more like a Collared Dove flight-call in the female.

Short-eared Owls also have repeated clipped hoots, as well as rather Lapwing-like contact calls. Both eared species also perform wing-claps as part of their displays.

Finally, Barn Owls have disturbing, worrying, prolonged witch-like screeches which give them their old 'screech owl' name. 🦉



An owl in a wood at night. Shape and habitat give some indication that this is a Tawny Owl. Sound is the best, most reliable evidence