

# THE BARN OWL

## ... nears extinction

When the sun sets beyond the horizon and the chorus of roosting birds dies down, the Barn Owl leaves its daytime hideout, a crevice in a cliff, to spend an active night flying on silent wings. With its acute sense of hearing it picks up the slightest movement of a wandering rat, mouse or shrew, to swoop down feet first to clutch its prey.

Its large eyes and hooked beak are set in the soft feathers of its white, heart-shaped facial disc. This strange appearance, as well as its peculiar behaviour have given rise to many superstitions. Its eerie cries and its flashing white underparts, as it sails silently overhead at night, must have been attributed in bygone times, when it was a common, to *Tas-Setta* or *Il-Hares* (Maltese Ghosts).

The Barn Owl *Tyto alba*, known in Maltese as *Barbagann*, is fourteen inches in length and has a soft-coloured plumage. The upper parts are washed with a pale golden buff colour flecked with greyish and white markings. Its facial disc and underparts are nearly pure white. Its legs, which are covered with white feathers down to its toes, end in long, strong claws. These, as well as a reversible innermost front toe, are well adapted to clutch and hold firmly live prey.

Although beneficial, the Barn Owl has been nearly exterminated from the Maltese Islands. It is shot mainly to be added to stuffed, mounted bird collections. While it can be claimed that the Barn Owl is cosmopolitan and relatively common in several

countries, it can barely keep a foothold in Malta. The Barn Owl is faithful to its breeding site and one by one pairs have been exterminated from well established nesting places such as the Mdina Bastions, Wied il-Għasel and the Citadel, Fort Chambray and Għajn Barrani in Gozo.

The site is usually a deep crevice in a cliff-face or bastion. Breeding commences in spring and continues well into summer. The number of white round eggs vary from two to six depending on the availability of food in the area.

It is indeed ironical that while the Maltese countryside is infested by rats and mice, the beneficial Barn Owl, an undisputed champion of rodent pest control, is being exterminated.

Joe Sultana

### FURTHER READING

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Barn Owl Pellets showing parts of rats and sparrows' skulls. Like all owls the Barn Owl's digestive system does not break down the bones and fur of its prey. These are disposed off in the form of pellets which are registered after each meal. Examination of pellets shows that the Barn Owl's diet in Malta consists mainly of rats, mice, shrews and sparrows. The latter are taken at night from their roosting places in trees





Two young of different ages. As incubation starts with the laying of the first egg the young in the same clutch are frequently of different ages. The young are at first covered with a thick, but soft coat, of white down. By the time they leave the nest-site they look like the adult birds

