

A silent sky-The decline of an Irish icon(editorial)

By Luke Cray



See ghostly figure around your home or hear the horrible wail of a woman, someone you knew was going to die as you were unfortunate to encounter a banshee. We have all heard the legend of a banshee a figure from Irish mythology that signalled the death of a family member with a horrible wail. In the past the scream would terrify those who heard of it, little did they know it wasn't a malevolent spirit but a bird no bigger than a crow. Unlike most owls that are famous for their hooting calls, barn owls screech and that combined with a fungus that grows on the owl feathers giving them a glowing appearance. The attributes along with their secretive nature gave way to the myth of the banshee. Sadly, though this staple of Irish folklore is disappearing from the Emerald Isle at an alarming rate, but why is this?

Barn owls are a small member of the owl family and are found across the globe from North and South America, Africa, Asia, and Australia. They are the most widespread bird of prey species on the planet but their populations are declining, especially in Ireland. This seems mainly to be a part of Ireland's rapid modernisation, especially in agriculture. The use of new types of pesticides while effective against killing rodents, insects and other pests that eat away at crops that farmers produce they have had a disastrous effect on the native barn owl populations as the owls are poisoned from their consumption of rodents who ingested the poison killing the owls. Another change in agriculture that has proven detrimental to the barn owl population is the decline of barns the namesake of the owls due to their habit of nesting in abandoned barns. Without these barns it's harder for the owls to find suitable nesting sites. These changes in agriculture have seen the barn owl population decline by fifty percent in the past fifty years.

While changes in agriculture have had a major decline in the population of barn owls here in Ireland there is another unforeseen threat to the barn owl population in Ireland and that is the decline of the pygmy shrew due to the growing invasive numbers of the greater, white-toothed shrew. After being discovered five years ago in owl pellets by Irish researchers David Tosh and John Lusby studying the eating habits of barn owls where they discovered the skulls of the rodents among the regurgitated pellets of barn owls. These invasive diminutive rodents are believed to have reached Irish shores from hessian-wrapped root balls of young trees imported from Europe unknowingly harbouring the shrews. These shrews have become a part of the owl's diet due to the decrease in the pygmy shrew population, it is theorised the owls' populations maybe declining due to their adaptation of eating the pygmy shrews and not of these foreign invaders. However further research is required for any further action is taken.

However, things seem to be finally looking up for the little predators as new conservation plan have been established to try and aid the diminishing local population. The Cork County council in recent years have been giving money to organizations such as Bird watch Ireland to try and save the shy birds. The construction of nest boxes designed for barn owls to raise young have proven to be an immense success with 2021 seeing the successful hatching of two hundred and fifty-five chicks being hatched throughout Ireland. This was the most successful for barn owls in fifty years.

We are still going to have to put in the work for barn owl numbers to increase and that includes changes to agriculture and the way farmers use pesticides. Barn owls were once considered to be the 'farmers friend' due to their consumption of mice and other harmful pests of crops. There are several solutions of the pesticide solution including the use of traps and the encouragement of the owls themselves to the farmland as a pair of breeding barn owls can consume over two thousand mice a year. This not only saves money for the farmers by not buying pesticides or losing crops, but it also helps the owls, it is a mutually beneficial arrangement for all parties.

The final way to help the plight of the barn owl is simply raising awareness about these rarely seen birds. The more people are aware of these birds the more we can do for these predators.

These magnificent birds are being pushed to the brink of extinction here in Ireland, this would be a tragedy to see such an important member of our mythology and heritage disappear from the land of Ireland forever. Living in an Ireland where the skies and countryside are devoid of these silent predators is an Ireland that has lost a part of its soul.