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Barn owls take off 'Green' farms aid comeback

Barn owls are making a comeback, thanks to farmers providing nest boxes and boosting food by planting habitat for mice and voles.

The much-loved birds declined dramatically over the past few decades because of the intensification of agriculture.

As farmers closed off barns because of strict health and safety rules over the storage of food and the fear of theft, the birds of prey no longer had anywhere to roost.

The main prey of barn owls, mice and voles, also declined as farmers ploughed up grassy areas.

But the birds are returning, with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds recording an increase in numbers over the past decade to around 5,000 breeding pairs.

The Barn Owl Conservation Network predicts the success of Conservation Grade farms, where 10 per cent of the land is left fallow for wildlife, could mean barn owl numbers will rise a further 25 per cent next year.

Tim Nevard, of Conservation Grade, a not-for-profit organisation that helps farmers manage land in an environmentally friendly way, said: "Watching a barn owl hunt down a hedge at dusk is a fabulous sight."

Louise Gray