

OWL PROWL

Tamzin Grey searches out this enigmatic creature of the night

It's an early autumn evening on the edge of the moor. A rough track stretches downhill ahead of us in the fading light and all the familiar landmarks are sinking back into the dusk. We can no longer see the tor behind us and individual trees are lost becoming merely blocks of deeper darkness when then the first owl call comes as exciting and eerie as ever, the classic to-wooo hoot.

The tawny isn't far from us, away in a patch of woodland to our right but we won't see it unless we're lucky. It calls again, the longer broken call this time and we stop to listen. A few seconds later there's a reply over to our left and then faintly another owl in the distance.

The temptation to join in the conversation gets the better of me. I count a few seconds, cup my hands and call back. Calling to tawny owls and receiving an answer is one of those special autumn and winter treats that never fails to excite a sense of wonder. If you can get the sound right, which isn't hard with a bit of practise, you can join in a, sometimes lengthy, dusk conversation.

Tawny owls seem fairly easily fooled. Listen to the rhythm of their calls and exchanges for a few minutes then cup your hands and try to mimic the nearest owl. You will probably find that the single and broken calls alternate and that some owls have a huskier tone than others. Less often you will hear the shriller kee-wick call which is harder to imitate.

Do your best and see what happens. You will normally receive a reply quite quickly if your call is realistic. If you're feeling really confident you might even attempt to imitate the squeal of a dying vole, which is sure to excite any nearby owls. However, if you find it hard to make the right sounds

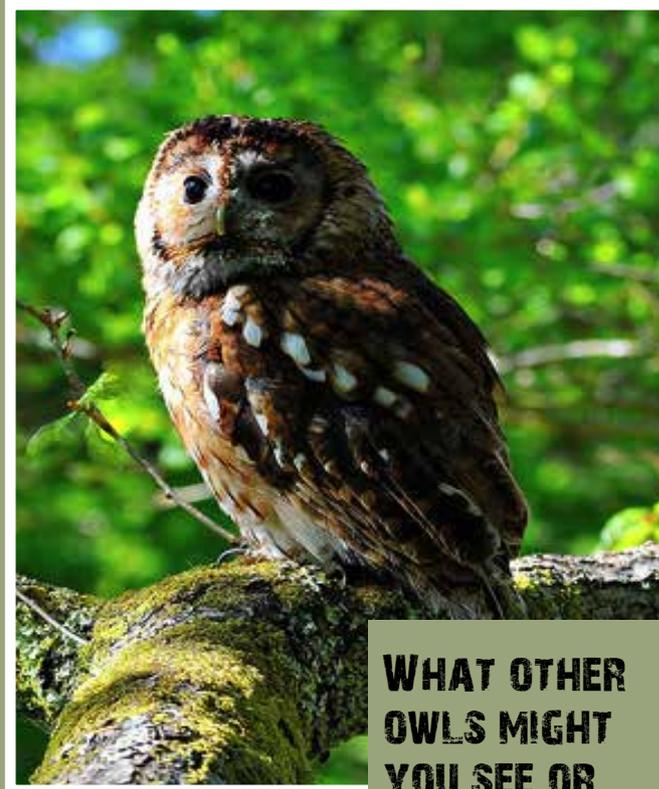
then there are plenty of owl call whistles on the market that sound very real.

Once you've perfected your call you'll often find that one or more owls fly in closer and closer to you. If you're lucky you might even catch a glimpse of them flying overhead or perched in a tree trying to see the elusive owl that's calling them.

Tawny owls are found throughout the National Park, frequenting the moorland margins, plantations and enclosed farmland wherever there is both tree cover and stretches of open ground. They nest from March onwards in tree holes or rock crevices and feed mainly on small mammals but will also take birds, frogs, fish, large insects and worms. Typically they locate their prey from a perch, relying on their incredibly sensitive eyes and ears in the dim light. They then pounce forwards through the shadows, their soft plumage enabling them to fly soundlessly and surprise their victims.

Calling owls is great fun but remember that owls only have a limited time in which to hunt so don't distract them for too long. Also listen carefully to their tone and stop calling if you sense a sudden change or if the owl flies in very close.

Throughout the ages owls have been associated with folklore and mythology, some believing them to be ill omens while others have seen them



WHAT OTHER OWLS MIGHT YOU SEE OR HEAR IN THE NATIONAL PARK

Tawny owls are by far the most common species of owl in the National Park but there are two other species that you might come across if you're lucky.

LITTLE OWL

These tiny owls were introduced from the continent in the nineteenth century and are most likely to be seen or heard in enclosed farmland where there are plenty of farm buildings and hollow trees to provide nesting sites. They make a rather plaintive mewling 'kiew' sound.

BARN OWL

Often described as ghost-like and once thought to be an ill omen, the silent swoop of a barn owl through car headlights is now a rare treat. Occasionally you may even be lucky enough to come across one quartering open ground in search of prey. You are most likely to see these owls in areas where there are old barns, ruins and exposed buildings such as church towers.

as symbols of good luck and wisdom. Whether you believe in any of the stories or not there can be no doubting that listening and watching for tawny owls adds a whole new dimension to a night walk. ■

Top tips for night walking

- Make sure that you know the area where you're going – explore it in daylight first if it's new to you.
- Walk with at least one other person and make sure that you leave details of your proposed walk with someone you can trust.
- Always carry a headtorch and spare batteries.
- Think carefully about where to leave your car.
- If you take a dog with you ensure that it is under close control.
- Keep noise to a minimum especially if you're using public rights of way close to houses.
- Maximise your chances of seeing wildlife by wearing dark non-rustly clothes that will blend in with your surroundings.