



## Little Owl Breeds for the first time

By

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In 2002 a male Little Owl turned up in willow tree in the goose grazing paddock. This was only the twentieth record of this species for the park. In its first year it would behave like this species behaves in its normal breeding locations. By that I mean that it could often be seen sitting out in the open in the tree, if alarmed it would then retreat into a crack where a limb had broken off limb. Its behaviour changed in the latter half of 2003, when it became reluctant to leave the safety of this crevice. Maybe because Sparrowhawk numbers had increased in the park and this would be an obvious target for the stealth hunting bird of prey. As I have mentioned already the rarity of this species, I felt that the only chance it would have of meeting a mate would be if it left. You can imagine my surprise when at 6.15am on 13<sup>th</sup> January 2004 whilst driving around the goose paddock 1 bird flew up off the grass followed by another. I only saw the owls on two other occasions in January before I presumed that they left the park. There were no signs at all again until Dave Johnson who lives in a house on the Inner Circle popped out into his garden one dark November evening in 2006 and heard one calling. He phoned me straight away as he new that as I taking part in a patchlist challenge among other London birders and needed this bird, unfortunately it was all silent when I got there, that's birds for you. It was good to know that at least one if it was a bird from 2004 was still present in the park. Within a month I found at that there were two birds still present. I was walking home from the staffs Christmas meal around the Outer Circle when the unmistakable screech of a Little Owl broke the silence. It was almost dark, as I made my way towards the sound of the owl. There by a hole in a plane tree were two birds when on seeing me dropped down out of sight.



As soon as possible in the new year I informed the assistant park manager of the presence of the owls. They were in one of the areas of the park that an ever increasing number of events take place. Luckily enough there were none due to take place until the summer. This should allow the birds the chance to breed with a little less disturbance. Though the area they have chosen as their territory, in fact like any of the open areas in the park are heavily used for sports during the lighter evenings. There was nothing I could do about that, the birds must used to people after the two years they had been together. I kept away from the area in general, though at times I would drive through it around dawn in case I should happen to glimpse a bird. It was not until late May that I first saw the male bird looking for food on the ground. Once it had found something it flew up into a nearby tree. A short while later it was back looking for food, it repeated this several times before I thought I would leave him in peace. This behaviour convinced me that it was feeding young, over the course of the next few mornings I was able to get some very good views as he did a circuit of the area perching in favoured trees. One of these was close to the tree I stopped under, allowing me to get some reasonable photographs. I never stayed to long as I did not want to draw attention to the birds. The proof I needed that they had been successful occurred on the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> June. As usual the male was showing well, looking for food. I then became aware of a hissing sound coming from the trees behind me. I sat watching the male who pulled a worm out of the ground, then flew up into the trees where the hissing was coming from. I reversed back a little to gain a view into the tree, there in the upper reaches I could see the male and behind him an owlet.

The owlet was fully grown with some down still visible. It must have been a little concerned by my presence as it had stretched itself, assuming the alarmed posture, which it does to make its self look bigger to scare off a predator, in this case me.



I would drive by most mornings to check on the progress of the owls. The birds were doing fine, though I did not know how many young there were. I was convinced that there were a minimum of two, but they were extremely wary.

The first threat to the owls from an unnatural cause was the Innocent Village Fete, an event that had been held the previous year. Then it was music based and over crowding was a problem. This year it was supposed to be more like a village fete, this in the heart of London in my opinion was impossibility. A meeting with the events organiser and the parks manager was held to air my concerns. After which I was led me to believe that this end of the show ground, which was totally fenced, was to be for family picnics. There was to be no loud music except in a marquee some distance away, with the two day event closing promptly at 7.30pm. It seemed that the rareness and vulnerability of the birds had been taken on board. The young in the mean time were gradually gaining confidence, and had chosen favourite roosting post. They would tolerate the public walking by as long as they did not stop beneath them. They were more wary though if they were accompanied by a dog, then they would move higher up the tree, or even back to the safety of the nest site. On the 14<sup>th</sup> July I had conclusive proof that three young had been raised, when they all sat out in the open above the nest hole. The event was looming, the first of the lorries were on site. It was looking fine, then one morning we noticed that tents had been erected and a refrigerated lorry had parked right beside the nest tree. I managed to have that removed but the rest of the site could, so I was told not be altered.



**Innocent Village Fete covers the owls feeding grounds**

Annoyed by the close proximity of the tents I kept a close eye on the birds during the event and its dismantling. On one of the mornings I was amused to see an owl perching on the roof of a lorry before flying down on to the ground. They seemed to have taken it in their stride, the rest of the summer going without to many hiccups. The only other inconvenience being a rugby event called "Scrum in the Park". I had returned to work after an enjoyable holiday to the Algarve to find the area next to the nest tree had been turned into a parking lot for cars and lorries. This again was lack of communication by various people or total disregard for the owls, but it was too late to be changed. Again the owls took it all in their stride, hopefully next year we can have a little more control on where these events are to be located.

As this was such a rare occurrence, the exact location of the owls was kept quiet. If anyone wanted to view them I asked them to email me. Then I could meet them and take them to see the birds, asking for the location to be kept to themselves and to observe the owls from a reasonable distance. You are then able to watch the birds behave normally. Everyone I took to see them really enjoyed the birds, the one exception being a couple visiting London from Norway. When we arrived at the site the Jays had beaten us to it, causing the owls to go into hiding. That is the frustration of birding, they do have wings.

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