

**CONFIDING OR WHAT – BUCKINGHAMSHIRE’S FIRST TWITCHABLE
LONG-EARED OWL IN A WHILE THRILLS ALL-COMERS**

By Lee G R Evans



***Plate 1: Long-eared Owl, near Pitchcott, Bucks, 18th March 2006 (Mike Wallen)
The first twitchable individual in the county for at least six years.***



Plate 2: Long-eared Owl, near Pitchcott, Bucks, 18th March 2006 (Tim Watts)

On Saturday 18th March 2006, local birders Rob Andrews (RDA) and Ben Miller (BM) were driving up towards Calvert Lake to search for the first-winter Glaucous Gull when they stopped to check a flock of Common Gulls feeding in a field along the Roman Way between Pitchcott and Stonehill Farm (at SP 765 204). To their amazement, a LONG-EARED OWL stood staring them in the face as it sat on the roadside hedgerow adjacent to a gate. Rob stopped the car allowing the two observers to gaze in wonderment at the bird just a few feet away. The owl didn't flinch – just sat staring at them with its bright orange eyes. Fearing it would fly at any moment, Rob carefully reversed away and parked further down the lane at a safe distance. A tractor soon appeared and despite slowing down and almost stopping at where the owl was roosting, it still didn't flinch! When a cyclist came by shortly later and it still sat unaffected, RDA and BM realised that it was worth contacting others. Working their way down a list of regular contacts, the information was soon relayed to around 20 local observers. Tim Watts, living closest, was first on

the scene and absolutely dumbstruck at seeing his first ever Long-eared Owl so close to home. Soon Mike Wallen, Rob Hill and Matt Slaymaker had arrived, along with Howard Ginn. For the next two hours, the owl remained, occasionally flying the few feet to the ground to investigate movements. It was totally unconcerned by its admirers, Mike Wallen soon approaching to within 25 yards to take photographs from his car window.

As usual when a good local bird appears, I was away in East Kent twitching a Serin. Following Rob's call at 1500 hours, I made my way back immediately, eventually reaching the site just prior to 1700. Luckily for me, the LEO was still performing and for a while I was concerned for its health. Realising that it was ridiculously confiding, I eventually approached it to within a few feet and carefully studied it from the car window to check for injuries or rings. It had neither and was presumably just feeling the effects of a week of extremely cold weather and in particular biting cold strong easterly winds. It had probably been forced out in the open and was hunting by day to utilise its remaining strength and body fats. It was of the grey morph and was almost certainly of continental rather than local origin. As dusk approached, a Barn Owl appeared closeby, and flew up and down the roadside verge alongside. The LEO perked up at the Barn Owl and followed its every movement with its eyes.



Plate 3: Long-eared Owl, near Pitchcott, Bucks, 18th March 2006 (Tim Watts)



Plate 4: Long-eared Owl, near Pitchcott, Bucks, 18th March 2006 (Tim Watts)

Howard Ginn continued observing the Long-eared Owl after I left and at around 1800 hours it flew from its perch and started to hunt alongside the hedgerow. It landed on a nearby fence post before eventually disappearing through the hedge and out of view in ensuing darkness.

Long-eared Owl is an extremely sporadic and rare breeding bird in Buckinghamshire with perhaps 1-2 pairs nesting annually (but rarely located). Like other inland counties in the region, small numbers of Continental birds winter including a bird found dead in High Wycombe on 3rd November 1932 (it had been ringed at Vogelenzyp in the Netherlands on 8th June 1932).

Long-eared Owl Occurrences in Buckinghamshire since 1989

1989) Westbury Wilds, 3 birds at roost site from 11th November into 1990.

1990) Westbury Wilds, up to 3 remained until 20th January; Shenley Brook End, up to 2 in roost, 8th-13th January; Woodham from 20th January to 23rd February and again on 24th April; one found dead beside the A41 at Woodham on 27th February and another found dead on the A40 at Piddington, near West Wycombe, on 24th October.

1991) Present at two breeding localities; near Frieth, 13 roosting in ivy from early January to late February, with 5 present on 12th March and 2 on 31st; Mursley on 19th & 31st March, 7th April and 16th April (2); Drayton Parslow on 7th & 23rd April and from 13th December into 1992; near Marlow on 3rd April (2); near Wendover on 13th August; Penn Street on 15th September; Olney in large garden from 9th November into 1992 (2); Linford NR on 30th November (3); Taplow Lake from 13th December into 1992 (4 birds) and Caldecotte on 15th December (2).

1992) Hollingdon, 5 roosting birds from 1st January until early March; Drayton Parslow, 2 on 11th January; Linford NR, 5 roosting birds from 21st February to 31st March, with 1-3 to 13th April; Mursley on 28th February; Weston Turville Reservoir from 1st-23rd April and Preston Bissett on 1st November (2).

1993) Pitstone Fen on 11th May, near Fawley Bottom on 24th November and at Slad Farm on 12th December.

1994) Weston Turville Reservoir on 1st & 15th January (trapped & ringed); Linford NR from 7th January until 22nd March (roost peaking at 8 birds); Beaconsfield on 11th November; Soulbury on 20th November (2) and Dorton on 5th December (7 birds).

1995) Bred at one location; Dorton, up to 7 remained in roost until 5th February, with 2 returning birds from 31st December; Linford NR, just one roosting bird from 10th February to 12th March; High Wycombe on 26th March and Burcott throughout March (3).

1996) Dorton, 4 remained until 28th January; Linford NR on 20th-23rd January; Mop End from 27th May to 6th June (2); Ixhill on 13th August and Linford NR, 3 from 28th December into 1997.

1997) Successful breeding at Dorton (4 young fledged) but roost site destroyed by building work; Linford NR from 1st January to 15th March (up to 4); Berryfields on 23rd March and killed by car at Blackthorn on 7th March.

1998) Linford NR from January to February.

1999) Quainton on 27th March; Flackwell Heath on 2nd November and Stowe on 13th November.

2000) Near Marlow on 23rd & 28th January; Broughton on 27th January; Stowe from 13th February to 6th March; Flackwell Heath on 20th August and at Speen, three roosting from 15th-19th November.

2001) Waddesdon on 28th April (road casualty) and Wendover on 3rd June.

2002) Bovingdon Green on 20th August

2003) North Dean on 25th September.

2004) Finemere Wood on 29th July.

2005) Church Wood, Hedgerley, on 21st May (hooting male).