

## MP visits local farm to celebrate new Species Champion role

Chief Whip the Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP visited Lower Barns Farm in his South Staffordshire constituency on 22 July in his capacity as the new Species Champion for the barn owl.

Mr Williamson met with farmer Andy Roberts along with staff from the RSPB to learn about the fantastic ways in which Andy manages his farm to the benefit of wildlife, and how agri-environment schemes can support the creation and management of habitats for numerous species of farmland bird, including barn owls.



Photo: Kirsty Brannan RSPB

*At the end of the visit Jess Chappell, Parliamentary Officer for RSPB, presented Mr Williamson with a barn owl poster for display in his office (from L-R Gavin Williamson MP, Jess Chappell RSPB, farmer Andy Roberts).*

Andy spoke about the vital need for agricultural subsidies in order to maintain a farming system which benefits nature, and the hard work and time that goes into maintaining habitat for different species on the farm.

Kirsty Brannan, RSPB Senior Conservation Officer in the Midlands, said: *“Barn owls are just one of many farmland species that need our active help to survive in a modern landscape. Agri-environment schemes have provided a lifeline for these beautiful birds over the last few decades, and it’s fantastic to have a local MP like Gavin stand up and be a champion for our barn owls.”*



*One of several of Andy's home-made barn owl nestboxes located across the farm, one of which has been successfully occupied by a pair of barn owls this year.*

*Photo: Kirsty Brannan RSPB*

Barn owls are found on farmland throughout the UK wherever there is rough grazing or tall grass. The species suffered declines through the 20th century and is thought to have been adversely affected by organochlorine pesticides such as DDT in the 1950s and '60s. The population has since recovered, although these birds are regular victims of traffic accidents, and may suffer from loss of habitat for feeding and nesting.

*Mr Williamson said: "It was such an honour to be asked to become Species Champion for the barn owl. I have already been out and about in South Staffordshire learning more about their habitats and the fantastic work that the RSPB is doing in protecting the species for future generations. For me they are a symbol of a healthy countryside and I'm hugely grateful to wildlife-conscious farmers like Andy who are helping them to thrive at the moment. I look forward to supporting people like him in future."*