

Article from our magazine Regulus: Helping Little Owls - 13 years of protection work in the south-west and centre of Luxembourg

This article is by Claudine Junck and Fernand Schoos. The summarised translation is by David Crowther. Please get in touch with me at dcrowther@pt.lu if you have any queries about the English text or the original version.



(c) Guy Conrady

SICONA (an inter-commune grouping providing professional conservation work, guidance and coaching) has been running a targeted Little Owl project since 1999. The starting point was an initial population survey, which showed that the situation was even worse than had been feared: only three breeding pairs in Kehlen commune, and one each in Reckange/Mess, Bissen and Koerich.

The project proper got underway in 2000, consisting of population monitoring, the provision of special nestboxes, and habitat improvement. The study area is now fully covered, so population dynamics over the past 13 years are extremely reliable.

The intensive monitoring work has revealed that male Little Owls tend to stay close to their natal site, whereas females generally disperse into a wider surrounding area. There are more ambitious movements, though -Luxembourg-ringed males have been found as far away as Euskirchen (Germany), while a female ringed as a nestling in Euskirchen made the opposite trip, with a clutch of her own in Mersch.

Little Owl territories vary from 20 to 50 hectares, 30 hectares being the general minimum size. Ideally, the core zone of any breeding territory should comprise at least 10 hectares of low-intensity grassland. Optimum ground cover is short-cropped grassland with patches of longer grass - the kind of pasture that used to be common, but which is now becoming increasingly rare. 'Biodiversity agreements' with farmers have proved vital: these cover zero-input grassland management, wild plant strips, and the planting and management of orchards, solitary oaks and pollard willows.



Agenda

- 29.07
Escapardenne et réserves naturelles
- 05.08
Jardin méditerranéen à Schwebsange
- 14.08 - 15.08
Assomption
- 18.08
Visite guidée
Schlammwiss by night
- 26.08
Porte ouverte à la Schlammwiss
- 26.08
En route avec le berger

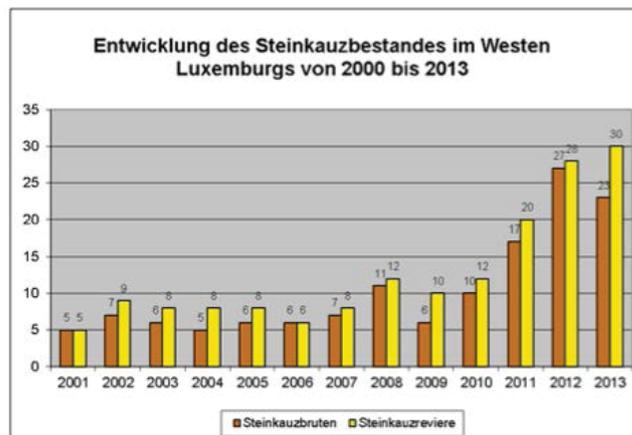




The essential element, though, is the provision of special nestboxes. These are 'tubes' made of woodcrete (i.e. a mixture of cement and wood chippings). They have two openings, with an 'ante-chamber' between, designed to keep Martens (the main predators) out. Nestboxes are usually sited in trees, but can be placed on buildings too, e.g. farm sheds. No currently known Little Owl nest sites are in natural tree cavities, though these are used as daytime rest sites. There are now some 400 Little Owl boxes in 42 communes in the south-west and centre of Luxembourg.

Initial breeding success was disappointing. From 2000 to 2007 there were no more than 5-7 broods a year. In 2008, though, the number of breeding territories at last reached double figures. Apart from a dip in 2009 (a bad year for small rodents - the main food source - and with heavy Marten predation), numbers have been improving steadily. In 2012 there were 27 Little Owl broods, in ten communes, with the biggest concentration in Beckerich. Breeding success depends heavily on food availability. 2012 was the third good breeding season in succession, thanks to a peak in the small rodent population. Precisely 100 juveniles were ringed.

2013 has been a good deal less successful though. This was partly because of the long, snowy winter, but mainly because of the cyclical collapse in the vole population. Many territories that had been occupied in 2012 remained unused in 2013, and in those territories which did have breeding pairs, the clutch size was small, a typical response to the poor food availability. Only 30 juveniles were ringed in 2013. Clearly, small birds had been the main source, in the almost complete absence of voles and beetles (no beetles because May and June were cold and wet).



Bruten 2012 und 2013 (Zahlen von 2012 in Klammern)

SICONA-Centre gesamt:	(17) - 14 Bruten	SICONA-Ouest gesamt:	(10) - 9 Bruten
davon in der Gemeinde:		davon in der Gemeinde:	
Beckerich:	(7) - 5	Dippach:	(4) - 4
Bissen:	(4) - 4	Garnich:	(1) - 0
Boevange/Attert:	(1) - 0	Kehlen:	(1) - 1
Mersch:	(4) - 3	Koerich:	(2) - 2
Saeul:	(1) - 1	Mondercange	(0) - 1
Useldange	(0) - 1	Reckange/Mess	(2) - 1

The graphics box gives details of successful broods: 2012 figures in parentheses, followed by the 2013 figures.

Despite this setback, though, the future is definitely looking brighter for the Little Owl. It's taking a lot of dedication and time and patience, though.

Cardinal points to bear in mind for any Little Owl conservation programme:

- Special nestboxes are the essential element. They replace the natural nesting opportunities that have been lost over the years.
- But Little Owls are changing their habits. There's no point in focusing only on the territories that used to hold breeding communities. Little Owls disperse, adapt to different habitats, form entirely new breeding clusters.
- Nestboxes have to be Marten-proof, especially in built-up areas, where predation is particularly heavy.
- In rural areas with little structural variety, Martens will investigate trees and hedges systematically. So the richer the landscape structure, the better.
- Like all birds, Little Owls are no respecters of national borders. So it's always best to design conservation programmes within a wider environment. In this case, the wider region (Luxembourg, together with neighbouring areas of Germany, France and Belgium) would be the right context.



[Click here to read the original article.](#)

More informations:

Génot J.-C. & P. Lecomte (2002) : La Chevêche d'Athéna. delachaux&niestlé. ISBN 2-603-01282-7. 144 p. richement illustrées

COL (2009) : Artenschutzprogramm Steinkauz Athene noctua in Luxemburg, Vorentwurf. Min. du Dév. durable et des Infrastructures. 15 S. www.luxnatur.lu/steinkauz.htm

Groupe noctua. Association pour l'étude et la protection de la Chevêche d'Athéna et de son biotope. www.noctua.org

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