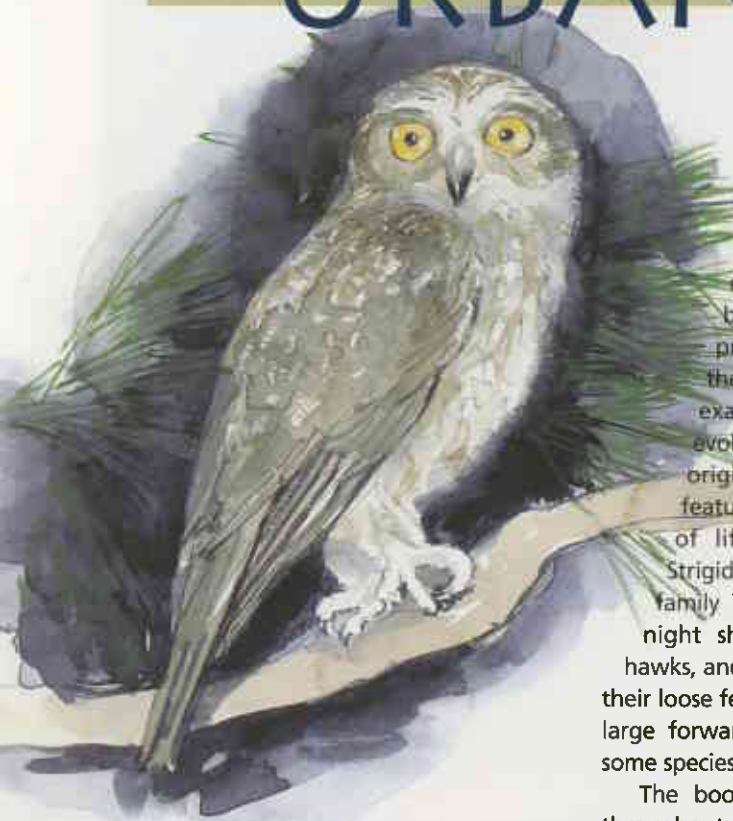


URBAN ANTICS



Because of their hooked beaks and curved talons, owls were once placed in the same classification as the hawks, but are unrelated to those predatory birds. Rather, they furnish another good example of convergent evolution—birds of separate origin developing similar features because of their way of life. Owls, of the family Strigidae, and barn owls, of the family Tytonidae, take over the night shift from the day-flying hawks, and are best characterised by their loose feathering, large heads and large forward-facing eyes, framed in some species by round facial discs.

The boobook owl is widespread throughout Australia and is found in all woodland and urban areas. Some 16 subspecies range from Indonesia to New Zealand, with about half in Australia. The Perth subspecies is known as the southern boobook or spotted owl.

Standing about 30 centimetres high, the southern boobook is the smallest Australian owl. It is usually sedentary, roosting by day in dense tree foliage, but has been seen in caves and in the outside stairwells of blocks of flats. They live in pairs but roost separately, each bird or pair having a number of roosts.

Boobooks are very active just after dusk and just before sunrise. They hunt small birds, mice and other small mammals, nocturnal lizards, such as geckos, and night flying beetles and moths. They have been seen taking moths on the wing under streetlights and occasionally batter dense foliage with their wings to disturb birds and beetles.

Their large eyes and acute hearing mean all owls are super-efficient detectors. With both eyes facing forward, an owl's vision is wide ranging and binocular, similar to that of people. This type of vision is required to catch live, fast-moving prey. Unlike people, however, their eyeballs are fixed. To focus, the birds need to constantly

move their heads in a circular bobbing motion, and can actually turn their heads through some 270°.

Prey is taken by razor sharp talons and life extinguished by the curved, hooked beak biting the neck and head of the victim. Prey is torn apart and completely consumed. Later, while at roost, the birds cough up a pellet of mixed bones, hair, feathers, scales and casings.

Unlike most other birds, an owl is completely soundless in flight. The long, stiff quills of the flight feathers are edged with silencers in the form of comb-like projections and fringes for a silent ghost-like attack on unwary prey.

Such is the little boobook, that still haunts me with its call from the shadows in the backyard, particularly during each spring and summer nesting time. Maybe it's a blessing, as it brings back the memories of good times past, or is it a timely reminder that I am but a mortal being, waiting 'til the owl calls my name?

BY JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- The smallest owl in the world is the elf owl from America, at about 15 centimetres long. The largest is the great grey owl of Canada, at about 75 centimetres long and with a wingspan of about 1.5 metres. Gulp!
- If you're driving at night, watch out for owls flying near the road after prey, as they are easily blinded by the light and just turn their heads away.
- The dish-like feathers of some owl species enable them to measure the distance by sound to live prey hidden under snow.

Mopoke, mopoke . . .

Stefan and I looked in amazement. There on the pergola beam, not five metres away, a small dark figure appeared, interjecting our quiet serious conversation on the day's Sheffield Shield cricket match with a 'mopoke...mopoke...mopoke'. Stef said "Gawd, look there, it's a sign mate, I told you Lillee had friends in high places."

The little boobook owl (*Ninox novaeseelandiae*) stayed for a while, as we downed a cool ale or three in that summer of '78. Not long after, Stef was killed in a terrible accident. Was it as the North American Indians say? "It was his time, for we heard the owl call his name." Superstition, or just downright mysterious?

In ancient civilizations, birds were symbols often raised to the rank of deities. The original bird god was probably the Garuda, a great, golden-winged mythical eagle of Tibet, while the strongest deity of Egypt was the falcon god Horus. The Greeks, who pictured it as the companion of Athene, the goddess of wisdom, and inscribed it on coins in the 5th century BC, first deemed the owl wise.

059973



The first stage of a long-distance mountain bike trail, that will ultimately lead from Mundaring to Albany, is now open. See page 49.

Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting.

LANDSCOPE



VOLUME EIGHTEEN, NUMBER 2, SUMMER 2002-2003



Discover the underwater wilderness of the Geographe Bay, Leeuwin-Naturaliste, Hardy Inlet area, a potential marine conservation reserve, on page 18.



Little was known about the distribution of the dalgyte, or bilby, in the south-west forests until scientist Ian Abbott interviewed old timers. Turn to page 28.



Older piles of the Busselton Jetty are crowded with marine life, but it was not always so. How do marine animals gradually colonise the piles? See page 34.



The Stirling Range National Park experiences many extremes of weather, from snow falls to bushfires. Find out why on page 10.

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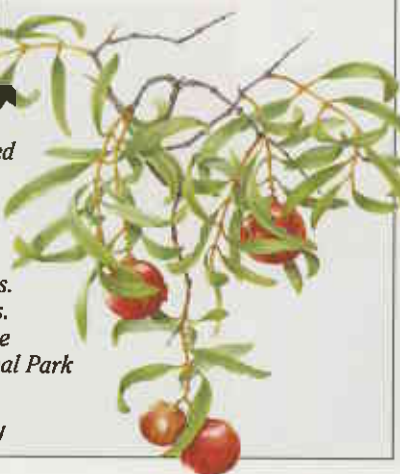
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COVER

Quandong (*Santalum acuminatum*) is one of the most widespread plants in Australia. This small, upright tree is most easily recognised by its bright red fruits, which are edible and also contain a nutritious nut. It belongs to the same genus as the famous sandalwood, which was one of Western Australia's major exports in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Members of this genus are root parasites. *Quandong* grows in dense stands in some areas within the Woodman Point Regional Park (see story on page 42).

Cover illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky



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