

## Min-min lights

**H**AS anyone ever seen these weird lights, hovering in the bush, or swooping across open spaces? The Aboriginal people feared the Min-min as a bringer of bad luck, a spirit that flies about in the night stealing children, for example. In England, a similar phenomenon called 'Will o' the Wisp', has been known for centuries. It bobs along lanes, rises to glide over hedges, streaks off across fields and alights on tombstones, thus striking fear into the hearts of watchers. But what actually is it?

It has been suggested that it is actually luminescing barn owls!

The lights behave in a very similar way to hunting owls. In England, they have occasionally been shot, and found to be owls (only once in Australia, near Winton in 1980). A very telling quote from Queensland reads:

"Looking around I saw a funny light which seemed to be following us. It scared me a little, the hair on the back of my neck stood up. 'Don't worry,' Moogoody said. 'You watch, I make light go.' Turning his horse towards the light he cracked his stockwhip and the light went out. 'That fellow bird follow cattle,' he said. 'They stir insects from grass and he make light to catch insects.'"

But if it is a barn owl, what makes the luminescence? Perhaps the birds had been roosting in a tree which contained luminescent fungi, and had become contaminated. Alternatively, perhaps the barn owl is intrinsically luminescent? After all, many fish are ...

What do you think? Has anyone any comments on Min-min lights to add to the debate?

*For detail, read Silcock, F. 1997. 'A review of accounts of luminosity in Barn Owls Tyto alba.' Australian Raptor Studies II, Birds Australia Monograph 3. Ed. G. Czechura & S. Debus.*

