

FAUNA

OWLS IN THE SOUTH WEST OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

by Ian Wheeler



Barn Owl



Masked Owl



Boobook Owl



Barking Owl

FOR those people who frequent the bush at night-time - walking, camping, spotlighting - many are rewarded with hearing the vocalizations of our owls, and even luckier are those rewarded with a glimpse of these beautiful and seldom seen birds. Unfortunately most owls seen are road kills, where they are often hit whilst hunting. Owls, being the equivalent of our day-time birds of prey, obviously hold a very important role in the ecosystem. How well do you know the owls?

Let's begin. Tawny Frogmouths are often called owls, but in fact are frogmouths not owls; Owlet Nightjars are nightjars not owls. Masked Owls fortunately are owls and so are Barn Owls. Boobooks are owls, and Barking Owls are not dogs but owls.

Confusing, but quite simple really. In the South West we have four owl species, belonging to two genera. The Tyto owls, "the white-faced owls", have two species, the Barn Owl and the Masked Owl. The Ninox owls have the Boobook and the Barking Owl.

Barn Owl - *Tyto alba*

The Barn owl is generally associated with open paddocks, and very few scattered trees, it likes

relatively open country. Barn Owls eat mostly mice; small rats and occasionally small rabbits, but generally it is a rodent specialist.

Masked Owl - *Tyto novaehollandiae*

The Masked Owl, which looks very similar at first glance to the Barn Owl, is a lot larger in size and takes much larger prey. This bird too is one that has a liking for open forest such as Dryandra forest. The edges of forest and farmland are where they hunt and they venture into farmland where suitable patches of trees occur. They catch rabbits, birds, possums, bandicoots and other similar sized prey. Very little is known about its distribution in WA.

Boobook Owl - *Ninox novaeseelandiae*

The Boobook Owl commonly occurs across the landscape in all forest types of varying density to open farmland. Its diet is extremely diverse, ranging from insects through to rats, rabbits and birds. It is quite an opportunist, which is probably why it is still relatively common. This owl has the most frequently heard call during spring.

Barking Owl - *Ninox connivens*

The Barking Owl is probably the least common of our owls. It appears to frequent more open country, but is recorded in the literature as often been associated with some water features such as dams, rivers, and wetlands. The Barking Owl's diet consists of possums, rabbits and, in the eastern states, some birds live almost exclusively on a diet of birds - White-wing Choughs, Rosellas and a whole range of other species. Very little is known about the Barking Owl's distribution in WA.

In spring 1999 and autumn 2000 the first systematic survey of owls in the South West of WA was conducted by CALM. The study focused on the Masked and Barking Owls in State forest and national parks. The area covered was from Toodyay in the North, through York, Narrogin, and the Stirling Range National Park to Two Peoples Bay in the east, Walpole on the south coast and over to Augusta/Margaret River on the west coast.

100 sites were selected and surveyed twice, once in spring and once in autumn and all nocturnal birds and mammals recorded. The sites were selected to also cover a whole range of logging histories

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from no logging through to logged three or more times. Seventy of these sites were in the Jarrah, Karri, Wandoo and 30 sites were in the Jarrah Wandoo woodland and forest fragments.

At each site, 15 minutes was spent listening for unelicited calls, followed by 10 minutes of playback using pre-recorded Masked and Barking Owl calls and listening for responses. Finally 10 minutes was spent searching a 1-hectare plot for any birds or mammals present.

Results

A total of 211 Tyto and Ninox owls were recorded on 67% of the sites. 196 of these records were

Boobooks and 15 were Masked Owls. In addition to the owls we recorded 76 Australian Owlet-nightjars and 20 Tawny Frogmouths. There were also three very tired researchers 7000 kilometers later!

WA is a big state, which makes coverage very difficult, but from this survey we can begin to build a picture of owl distribution in the South West. Can you help? We are particularly interested in the Barking and Masked Owls. The distribution knowledge for these species is sparse and it is important to get more records to give a better understanding of where these owls are living and hopefully their habitat requirements.

What can I do?

Find out what owls you have.

- ▶ Fence out that remnant vegetation to get some regeneration happening.
- ▶ Leave those old trees for nesting or possibly put up nest boxes if you have young regeneration and no old trees.
- ▶ If you have a healthy patch of bush you should have lots of insects, birds and mammals, and hopefully some owls.

Please forward any sightings of owls to Ian Wheeler: ph 9771 7994 or

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Ian Wheeler grew up in the wheatbelt and moved down south to work with CALM Science on forest ecology. He is very involved in the conservation of plants and animals and the role that landholders can play in this.

OWL CALLS

Barn Owl	rasping screech
Masked Owl	strong harsh hissing/screech, also chattering
Boobook	mo poke, or double hoot - repeated monotonously
Barking Owl	series of barks or woofs (very dog-like), also human-like scream