

FAUNA

OWL SURVEY - A COMMUNITY GROUP FIRST IN WA

by Jenny Dewing

MOST of us experience owls only as pictures in bird books or the occasional encounter on a country road at night. Some of us are familiar with the characteristic call of the Boobook.

In July, Ian Wheeler from CALM Science inspired members of the Blackwood Environment Society with a talk on Owls of the South West. Landholders were keen to learn more about these much admired birds. Ian suggested a Community Owl Survey and the audience responded enthusiastically. He provided a tape of owl calls, which landholders are using to improve their recognition skills.

Recent work by CALM is gathering information about the conservation status of these important birds, particularly the Barking Owl, *Ninox connivens connivens* (Priority 2) and the Masked Owl, *Tyto novaehollandiae* (Priority 4). Priority 2 taxa need urgent survey and evaluation of conservation status whereas Priority 4 taxa are considered to be in need of monitoring.

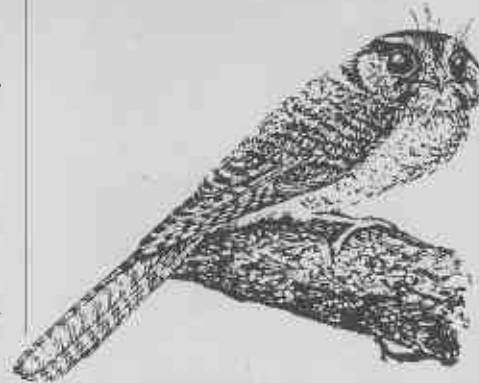
On Saturday November 18th, 33 Environment Society members, including 16 *Land for Wildlife* members undertook the district-wide owl survey.

The survey aimed to sample a wide range of sites around Bridgetown where owls are likely to occur, particularly the priority species. Sites were chosen around the Blackwood River, in State forest, at the interface between paddock and bush and along major tributaries. A team of seven people spent an extra evening before the survey to train as group leaders so that the survey could cover more sites. Fourteen sites were surveyed on November 18th, and two on the training session.

The survey is simple. It is designed to be compatible with



Tawny Frogmouth



Australian Owlet-nightjar

current surveys so that the data can be included. The procedure for each site is as follows:

- ▶ On arrival at the site, fifteen minutes is spent listening for any owls that may already be in the area. Owls already present often call and leave quickly when they are disturbed.
- ▶ The listening is followed by ten minutes of playback. The owl tape is amplified through a megaphone to increase the coverage of the sound. Between calls, the group listens for an owl response in the form of a call or shape flying overhead. Once an owl is sighted, spotlights are used

to confirm the identity of the bird. It takes some skill to get a spotlight onto the bird before it disappears.

- ▶ After the tape playback a further 10 minutes of spotlighting is carried out to note possums, phascogales and other forest creatures. This information adds to our knowledge of local fauna.
- ▶ Information on habitat type, weather conditions, time and a GPS location is also recorded.

Ideally sites are surveyed four times a year. Owls hunt over a large territory, for Masked Owls some 800 hectares, so it is possible to miss them if they are preoccupied at the other end of their territory. Experience suggests that one visit gives a 30% possibility of detection and rises to 90% for nine visits if they occur in the area.

In the Bridgetown area we are particularly keen to learn the status of the Barking Owl, the largest of these birds. Commonly people say that they have heard one, many years ago, but there are few recent reports. It is hoped that the survey will tell us more about the population status of the birds and the kinds of habitat that they prefer in this area.

Our survey identified Masked Owls at three of sixteen sites, together with a Boobook, a Tawny Frogmouth, an Australian Owlet-nightjar, bats and a number of Brushtail Possums. Conditions were windy which reduced the effectiveness of the playback system. The group has committed to repeating the survey four times next year commencing in February 2001.

Jenny Dewing is LFW Officer at Bridgetown. She can be contacted on 9761 2318.