

THE Blackwood Environment Society and *Land for Wildlife* members carried out a community owl survey from November 2000 to November 2001. This survey was not a full blown scientific survey but was designed to introduce community members to a much admired group of birds that are common in this district. It gathered information on the local distribution and numbers of owls, particularly the two priority species, masked and barking owls. Ian Wheeler, CALMScience, trained six team leaders to take small groups out to different survey sites, this way more sites were covered and the experience was "hands on" for each participant.

The survey technique used was the one developed by the Department of Conservation and Land Management for monitoring forest sites in the southwest of WA. This way the data could be included in the Statewide database. Four separate surveys were carried out, at different times of the year and over a range of habitats, to see if season, and/or habitat, influences the occurrence and activity of the owls. Each site was monitored in the four surveys but the number of sites was extended where an enthusiastic landholder wanted to include their home patch. In total, 14 regular sites were monitored and about a dozen casual observations collected.

The detail of the monitoring procedure was reported in *Western Wildlife* 5/1. Essentially surveyors at each site first listen, then play an owl tape and listen for responses, then spotlight and record fauna observed.

Masked owls were heard or observed at eight of the fourteen sites, mostly only once over the year. Previous survey experience from the Department of Conservation and Land Management indicated that up to nine surveys are required to pick up 90% of owls in a particular territory as their range is about 800 hectares. The barking owl remained elusive, despite many reports from landholders who have heard them.

Observations indicated that masked owls were more prevalent along the forested Blackwood River

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## UPDATE ON THE COMMUNITY OWL SURVEY

*Jenny Dewing*

valley and the Hester Brook foreshore. One to two masked owl observations were recorded for all survey nights with autumn producing more observations - 8 masked owls over 5 sites. Autumn produced the largest number of observations, but weather on individual nights could be more significant than season, as the autumn survey was also conducted in the best weather conditions, fine, still and clear. More frequent surveying over the same sites is needed to establish a seasonal trend.

Surveyors observed Australian owlet nightjars, tawny frogmouths and a boobook owl during their drive to and from the survey sites. These observations were also recorded in the database. Spotlighting carried out during the procedure revealed healthy populations of brushtailed possums and phascogales.

Data collected from the survey was provided to the Department of Conservation and Land Management and to *Birds Australia* for the census of Australian Birds. Data was entered into an Access database which is available to other groups interested in using this survey technique.

One of the rewarding outcomes of the exercise was an unprecedented public interest in owls. Over sixty different landholders from around the district and nearby areas registered to attend. Participants included people registered with *Land for Wildlife*, Blackwood Environment Society members and the general public. Some participants travelled from Manjimup, Donnybrook and Kojonup to attend. Displays at the Balingup Small Farm Field Day and the Bridgetown Show attracted enormous interest and a demand for information and owl tapes, which were distributed widely to landholders. Articles on the survey were written for local newspapers.

The Blackwood Environment Society will continue to monitor the fourteen sites 1-2 times a year, autumn and spring. The group will also assist Ian Wheeler to extend the survey to Boyup Brook and Balingup this year. Several landholders from the Boyup Brook area have reported barking owls - it would be exciting if we encountered one!

Last year the conservation status of the masked owl changed from priority four status to priority three, reflecting its lower numbers in the southwest. Scientists suggest that clearing of native vegetation for farming and changes in fire regimes are the likely causes of this decline. The action plan for Australian Birds 2000 recommends further baseline surveys.

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### Bush Rangers and owls

Ian Wheeler has been teaching owl monitoring techniques to CALM Bush Rangers from Metropolitan schools. Some of the Bush Rangers are also helping by completing the GIS mapping of owl species sightings, and also by making a CDROM of owl calls. When ready, these will be available for community group use via Ian.