

IDENTIFICATION GUIDE

Owls of South East Queensland



**Resilient
Landscapes**

National Environmental Science Program



UNIVERSITY of
TASMANIA 

CONTENTS

1. Guide to *Ninox* Species

- Southern Boobook
- Powerful Owl
- Barking Owl

2. Differences between *Ninox* species

3. Guide to *Tyto* Species

- Australian Masked owl
- Eastern Barn owl
- Greater sooty owl
- Australasian Grass owl

4. Differences between Barn and Masked owls

5. Guide to other nocturnal birds

- Australian owlet-nightjar
- White-throated nightjar
- Tawny Frogmouth

SPECIES IDENTIFICATION

Ninox species

AUSTRALIAN BOOBOOK

Ninox boobook ➤

SIZE | 32cm

DESCRIPTION

Small, brown owl with a large head and blackish patches around each eye. It is identified by its dark plumage; dark chocolate-brown above and rufous-brown below, heavily streaked and spotted with white. Young Southern Boobooks are almost entirely buff-white below, with conspicuous dark brown facial discs.

HABITAT TYPE

Occupies all forested habitat in Australia, often seen roosting in dense foliage. Common in SEQ.



SPECIES IDENTIFICATION

Ninox species

POWERFUL OWL

Ninox strenua ➤

SIZE | 55cm

DESCRIPTION

Large owl with a relatively small head and rounded tail. Dark grey to dark grey brown above with white barring and distinctive grey-brown V shaped chevrons across their off white chest. Piercing hawk like yellow eyes.

HABITAT TYPE

Often seen roosting by day in trees, clasp remains of the previous night's prey. Inhabits wet and dry eucalypt forests, as well as urban areas with high abundance of possums and hollow bearing trees.



BARKING OWL

◀ *Ninox connivens*

SIZE | 41cm

DESCRIPTION

Medium sized, cool grey owl with white spots on wings and whitish underside with heavy streaks of brown. Vibrant yellow green eyes. Make a characteristic call like a dog bark ('wook-wook') and a screaming call.

HABITAT TYPE

Open forests, savannah woodlands, watercourses and farmlands. Can be confused with Powerful owls.



POWERFUL OWL VS BARKING OWL

Call

Powerful owls have a distinct Hooo-hoo call, whereas the Barking owl has a 'wook-wook' call that sounds like a dog bark, as well as a screaming call.

Back Plumage

Powerful owls have more barring across their back, rather than the white spots of a Barking owl.

Plumage

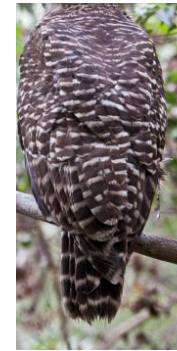
Powerful owls have distinct V chevrons, whereas barking owls have streaks of brown feathers down front.



Powerful owl



Barking owl



Powerful owl



Barking owl

Size

Powerful owls are larger than barking owls.

Prey

Powerful owls are often seen clasp their large prey in their talons whilst roosting. Signs of powerful owls in your region may also include the presence of discarded possum tails. Barking owls generally feed on smaller prey such as lizards, mice and frogs.

SPECIES IDENTIFICATION

Tyto species

AUSTRALIAN MASKED OWL

Tyto novaehollandiae ➤

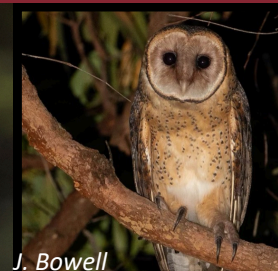
SIZE | 41cm

DESCRIPTION

Less commonly seen owl with highly variable plumage from pale grey to dark. Easily confused with barn owls. Plumage is more coarsely patterned with a round facial disc and continuous black facial rim. Powerful and densely feathered legs with large feet.

HABITAT TYPE

Forests and woodlands and on the fringe of woodlands with large hollow bearing trees for nesting.



EASTERN BARN OWL

◀ *Tyto javanica*

SIZE | 33cm

DESCRIPTION

Small, pale owl with white heart shaped facial disk with narrow black rim. Sandy orange and light grey upper, with black spots uniformly distributed across back and chest. Skinny legs with hair like feathers. Widespread and relatively common, they can be confused with the Masked owl. Can appear 'white' in torch shine and car headlights.

HABITAT TYPE

Open forests and farmlands with interspersed woodlands



SPECIES IDENTIFICATION



National Environmental Science Program

GREATER SOOTY OWL

Tyto tenebricosa ➤

SIZE | 34cm

DESCRIPTION

Large, heavy dark sooty coloured owl. Fine white spots on the head. The underbelly is greyish-brown, paler towards the belly with small spots and mottling. Large black eyes and prominent heart shaped facial disk, sooty black- dark grey- silver, and heavy dark rim. Short tail and feathered legs, dark grey toes and massive talons. The bill is feather-covered almost to the tip. Round wings

HABITAT TYPE

Inhabits rainforest, subtropical and warm temperate forests including wet eucalypt.



AUSTRALASIAN GRASS OWL

◀ *Tyto longimembris*

SIZE | 35cm

DESCRIPTION

Reclusive and rarely seen. Tan-brown overall with black, white, and orange mottling on the wings. Very long legs that dangle down when flying. Heart shaped facial disc, similar to Barn and Masked owls, however rarely seen and inhabits different area. Very long legs differentiate grass owl from otherwise similar looking Barn owls.

HABITAT TYPE

Only inhabits grasslands, meadows and cane fields with long grassy cover. Not seen in forested areas. Nests in dense fields.



MASKED OWL VS EASTERN BARN OWL

Barring on Feathers

Australian Masked Owls have more obvious barring and more barring than Eastern Barn owls



Masked Owl



Eastern Barn Owl

Face shape

Australian Masked owls have slightly rounder facial disc shape, although this isn't a feature to rely on

Colour

Masked owls can be pale, grey or dark colour. Barn owls are only ever pale.

Legs and feet

Best method of distinction between pale form Masked owls and Eastern Barn owls. Masked owls have thick, fully feathered legs and large powerful feet. Eastern barn owls have smaller thinner legs that aren't fully feathered with smaller feet.



Masked Owl



Eastern Barn Owl



Australasian grass owls also look similar to Barn owls in particular, and can be distinguished by their very long legs that protrude behind them when flying. Australasian grass owls also inhabit grassy open areas and are rarely seen.

SPECIES IDENTIFICATION

Other nocturnal birds



National Environmental Science Program

WHITE-THROATED NIGHTJAR

Eurostopodus mystacalis ➤

SIZE | 32cm

DESCRIPTION

Largest and darkest nightjar. Long folded wings reach almost to tail tip. White marks on the side of the throat give them their name. Commonly seen in late evening when flying over clearings or water.

HABITAT TYPE

Roosts on ground in leaf litter during the day, rarely in tree hollows.



M. Campbell

AUSTRALIAN OWLET NIGHTJAR

◀ *Aegotheles cristatus*

SIZE | 22cm

DESCRIPTION

Small and dainty with a large eye and broad based bill. Eyes are faintly reflective when exposed to torch light or headlights. Either russet brown or more commonly, grey colour. Faintly barred with black and with two black stripes over head.

HABITAT TYPE

Widespread across forested environments, common in dry woodland, avoids rainforests. Requires tree hollows.



SPECIES IDENTIFICATION

Other nocturnal birds



National Environmental Science Program

TAWNY FROGMOUTH

Podargus strigoides ➤

SIZE | 42cm

DESCRIPTION

Commonly seen perching in open positions, relying on camouflage. Nocturnal with an owl-like appearance, they aren't technically owls and lack talons. They are silver-grey, with a yellow eye and wide heavy bill.

HABITAT TYPE

They can be found in almost any habitat, from woodlands to heath, urban areas and farmland. They are common and are often spotted during the day blending in to the tree.



Record your sightings on iNaturalist

Use iNaturalist to record, identify and map sightings of wildlife in your area and contribute to scientific data collection.



Acknowledgements



National Environmental Science Program

This species identification guide is supported by funding from the Australian Government under the National Environmental Science Program.

Contributing Authors

Maaïke Hofman

Michael Tervo

Photographers

Canva

[Jessica Hyde, Karen H Black, Connor Dekker, Chris Putnam, OzFlash, GaryTog, Marijucus, John Carnemolla, Chameleonseye, Stephane_Jaquemet, Tanuza, Albert Wright, Imogen Warren, Geoff Oliver, Istanners]

(c) Wang.QG - iNaturalist- <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/218393484>

(c) Mike Melton- iNaturalist- <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/147532910>

(c) Brett Mezen- iNaturalist- <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/64506657>

(c) Max Campbell- iNaturalist- <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/60387248>

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



National Environmental Science Program

