

Owls are mainly nocturnal birds of prey. They are chunky, and usually streaked brown and buff and spotted white. Large head and flat-faced with large eyes in a paler facial disc. Bill short and hooked. Powerful feet and talons. Sexes alike; females slightly larger. Plumage is soft, and so flight is silent. Voice ranges from plaintive calls to harsh screeches.

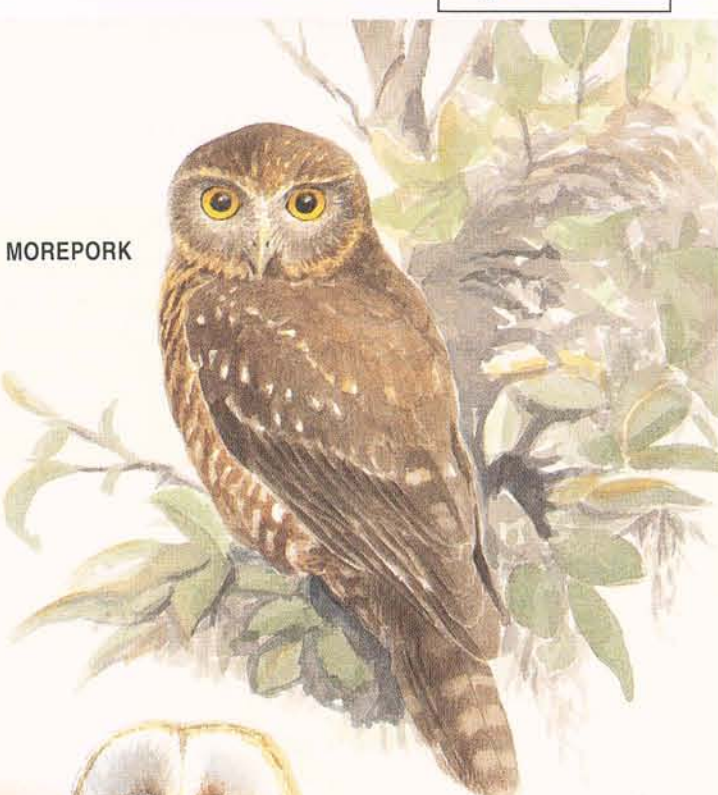
**MOREPORK (Ruru)** *Ninox novaeseelandiae*

Common native

29 cm, 175 g. *Dark brown owl*, obscurely spotted and barred buff. Yellow eyes set in dark facial mask. Larger rounder head and longer tail than Little Owl. Nocturnal; roosts by day in thick vegetation, especially in tree ferns. Main call a loud double hoot – ‘more-pork’ – also repeated monotonous ‘more’ and rising vibrating ‘cree’. **Habitat:** Forest, scrub, lightly forested open country, parks and gardens. **Breeding:** Sep–Mar. [Sp 274]



MOREPORK

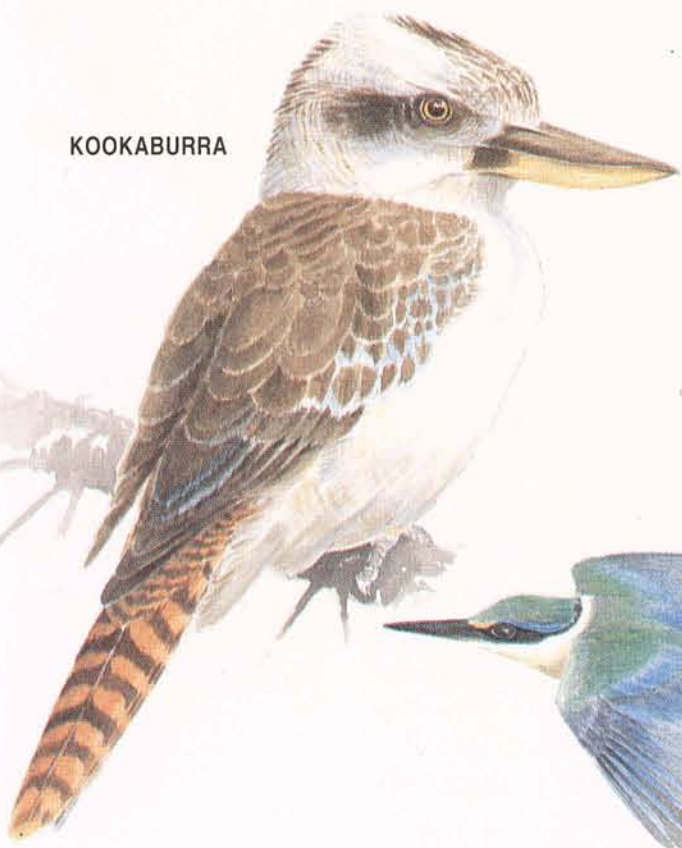


LITTLE OWL



BARN OWL

KOOKABURRA



KINGFISHER

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**TYPICAL OWLS**

About 130 species; 1 extinct species was endemic to New Zealand, 1 is native and 1 is introduced.

Owls are mainly nocturnal birds of prey, although overseas some species hunt by day. They have a large head and very flexible neck, so that the whole of the head can be rotated through 270° to look for prey at the side or the rear. The large eyes, directed forward, give good binocular vision in low-intensity light. The yellow eyes are set in a brown circular disc of feathers. This facial disc helps to direct sound to the large ear openings. The bill is short and hooked. Legs are well feathered, except for the bare powerful feet

**Strigidae**

with needle-sharp talons. As their plumage is soft and wing feathers have softened edges, the flight of typical owls is silent. They specialise in catching rodents, small birds and large insects. Prey is usually eaten whole, and the indigestible parts are regurgitated in a sausage-shaped pellet lined with bones and hard pieces and coated with fur and feathers. Their eggs are white and usually laid in a hollow.

**Reading:** Burton, J.A. 1973. *Owls of the World: Their Evolution, Structure and Ecology*. Netherlands: Lowe. Hollands, D. 1991. *Birds of the Night: Owls, Frogmouths and Nightjars*. Balgowlah, NSW: Reed.

**274. MOREPORK** *Ninox novaeseelandiae*

Plate 63

**Other names:** Ruru, Boobook (Australia)

**Size:** 29 cm, 175 g

**Geographical variation:** Three subspecies, if the Southern Boobook *N. boobook* of Australia and its various subspecies is treated as a separate species. The subspecies *albaria* formerly bred on Lord Howe Island, *undulata* breeds on Norfolk Island, and *novaeseelandiae* breeds in New Zealand.

**Distribution:** Throughout forested areas of the North, South and Stewart Islands from sea level to the upper bushline, and on most larger forested offshore islands from Three Kings to Codfish Island. Vagrants have reached The Snares. Widespread but sparingly distributed in drier eastern areas. They live in native and exotic forest and in open country with clumps of mature trees for shelter and nesting.

**Population:** Widespread and moderately common.

**Conservation:** Protected native. The subfossil and midden records of Moreporks are all within the last 1000 years, perhaps indicating that they were scarce before human settlement of New Zealand. Although much forest was cleared by Maori and then by European settlers, their food supply may have been increased with the introduction of small mammals – the Pacific rat, brought by Maori,

and then mice, ship rats and Norway rats brought by Europeans.

**Breeding:** The nest site is usually in a hollow tree or branch, but sometimes in a clump of epiphytes, in a cabbage tree, in a pile of pine needles in a tree fork, or on the ground in the shelter of a rock, in a petrel burrow or among the roots of pohutukawa. Laying is in September–February, mainly October–November. They lay 1–2–3 white eggs (38 x 34 mm). The female alone incubates for 20–30 days but is called from the nest and fed by the male. The fledging period is c. 35 days.

**Behaviour:** Moreporks roost in trees, preferably in gullies, with plenty of shelter overhead, but they may be found and mobbed by small birds. Their usual call is a clear ‘more-pork’, the final syllable sometimes repeated and prolonged. Other calls include a monotonous, deep, repeated ‘more-more-more-...’, and a repeated ‘cree’ when hunting. They rarely call during daylight, usually starting from dusk.

**Feeding:** Diet is mainly large insects such as weta and cicadas, and night-flying insects such as moths and huhu beetles, including those attracted to lights, which they catch with their talons or bill; also spiders, mice, young rats and small birds. When eating large

prey, they hold it in one foot or stand on it with both feet and tear off pieces. Pellets of indigestible material are cast beneath their daytime perches.

**Reading:** Imboden, C. 1975. *Notornis* 22: 221–230. Lindsay, C.J. & Ordish, R.G. 1964. *Notornis* 11: 154–158.