

New Zealand, like many other isolated island groups, has a long history of bird extinction. About 32 species died out in the 800 years between the arrival of Polynesians and the arrival of Europeans, most notably all the moa species. In the 200 years since European contact, 9 further species have become extinct, 5 of which have probably died out since 1900. The main factors that contributed to extinction were loss of habitat, introduced mammalian predators and overharvesting.

**LAUGHING OWL (Whekau) *Sceloglaux albifacies***

**Extinct endemic**

38 cm. A large owl with yellowish-brown plumage heavily streaked brown. Face white around dark reddish-brown eye, chin greyish; white splashes on scapulars, sometimes also on hindneck and mantle; wings and tail brown with brownish-white bars; bill horn-coloured, black at base; long well-feathered yellowish to reddish-buff legs. Calls, mainly on dark nights, 'a loud cry made up of a series of dismal shrieks frequently repeated', and 'a peculiar barking noise'. **Habitat:** Forests, scrub and open country with rock and limestone outcrops for cover. Last recorded South Canterbury, 1914. [Sp 275]



**TYPICAL OWLS**

**Strigidae**

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

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.

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

**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.

**275. LAUGHING OWL *Sceloglaux albifacies***

**Plate 74**

**Other name:** Whekau

**Size:** 38 cm, 600 g

**Geographical variation:** Two subspecies: *rufifacies* of the North Island, and *albifacies* of the South Island and Stewart Island.

**Distribution:** Subfossil remains of the North Island subspecies are found at numerous sites, including swamps, caves, dunes and a few middens. There were only four records since European settlement: skins collected on Mt Taranaki (1854) and in the Wairarapa (1868), and sightings near Gisborne (1889) and near Porirua (before 1892). The southern subspecies is also widespread as subfossils, including a few midden records from the South and Stewart Islands. In the mid-1800s, Laughing Owls were fairly common and reported widely from Nelson, Canterbury, Otago and Fiordland, and skins came from Stewart Island in about 1880. They seemed to prefer forest and scrub edges and rocky places in open country, such as limestone outcrops. They declined rapidly and were rare by 1880. The last known bird was found dead at Bluecliffs, South Canterbury, in 1914.

**Likely causes of extinction:** The rapid decline suggests introduced avian diseases as a possible cause; however, the introduction of mustelids for controlling rabbits in the habitats used by Laughing Owls, the decline of the Pacific rat and the collection of museum specimens can not be ruled out as contributing factors.

**Breeding:** A few nests, lined with dry grass, were found in deep, dry, crevices among rocks, mostly with such narrow entrances that birds had to be smoked out. The usual clutch was 2 white eggs (48 x 40 mm).

**Behaviour:** The calls of the Laughing Owl were described as 'a loud cry made up of a series of dismal shrieks frequently repeated' and 'a peculiar barking noise . . . just like the yelping of a young dog'.

**Feeding:** Cave deposits indicate their diet was mainly birds, geckos, bats and rodents. Earthworms and insects such as beetles were also eaten.

**Reading:** Holdaway, R.N. & Worthy, T.H. 1996. *J Zool (Lond)* 239: 545–572. Williams, G.R. & Harrison, M. 1972. *Notornis* 19: 4–19.