

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.

LITTLE OWL *Athene noctua*

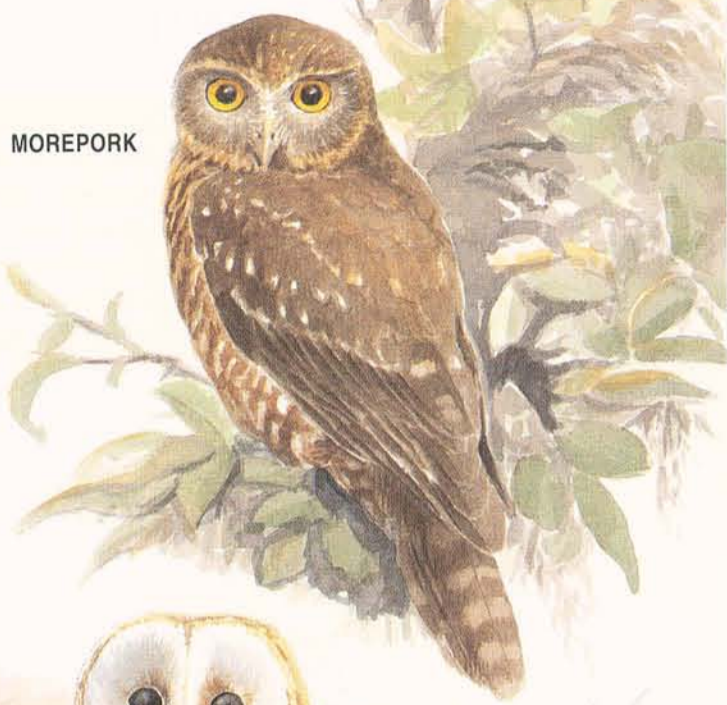
Locally common European introduction

23 cm, 180 g. *Small grey-brown owl, heavily streaked and spotted white.* Flatter head and shorter tail than Morepork. Often seen by day perching on posts and farm sheds. Flight undulating. Call a clear high-pitched 'kiew'. **Habitat:** Farmland of South I only, especially near east coast. **Breeding:** Oct-Jan.

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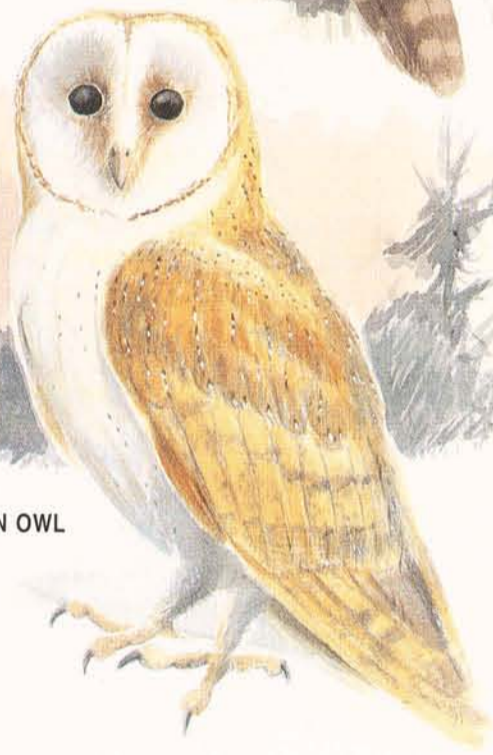
LITTLE OWL



MOREPORK



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.

276. LITTLE OWL *Athene noctua*

Plate 63

Other name: German Owl
Size: 23 cm, 180 g
Geographical variation: Twelve subspecies, of which *vidalii* of Germany, was introduced to New Zealand; this was the subspecies introduced to Britain in the late 1800s.
Distribution: Natural range is continental Europe, northern Africa and western Asia. In an endeavour to control the numbers of small introduced birds, the Otago Acclimatisation Society imported 219 Little Owls from Germany between 1906 and 1910, and others were liberated in Canterbury about the same time. They are now widespread in farmland and towns in Nelson, Marlborough, Canter-

bury, Otago and Southland. A few are seen in Westland and Fiordland. No recent confirmed records from Stewart Island or the North Island. They live in hedgerows, haysheds, old farm buildings, clumps of trees; in daylight they often sun themselves on fenceposts, hedges, tree branches, roof ridges, and telegraph poles near old farm buildings.
Population: Widespread and locally common, especially in drier coastal areas of the eastern South Island.
Breeding: The usual nesting sites are holes in trees, old farm buildings, haystacks, stacks of hay bales, rabbit burrows, and banks, e.g. disused quarry walls. Most eggs are laid in

October–November. They lay 2–3–4–5 white eggs (35 x 29 mm), which the female alone incubates for c. 28 days. The fledging period is 30–35 days. The age of first breeding is 1 year, though not all breed then. The oldest bird banded in Britain lived to at least 10 years old.
Behaviour: Solitary. They are usually seen in the late afternoon sunning themselves rather than looking for food, or are disturbed from roosts in farm buildings or hedgerows. Their usual call, heard mostly in autumn and winter, is a clear, high-pitched 'kiew'. They bob up and down when alarmed. Their flight

is undulating.
Feeding: Although introduced to control small birds that had become pests in orchards and cereal crops, their diet in New Zealand is mainly insects (caterpillars, beetles and earwigs), spiders and earthworms. They also take a few small birds, frogs, lizards, mice and rabbits. Little Owls often feed on the ground, walking and running freely, sometimes by day as well as at night.

Reading: Marples, B.J. 1942. *Trans Proc Roy Soc NZ* 72: 237–254.