



● Distribution

POWERFUL OWL

Ninox strenua

Secretive by nature, soundless in flight, and equipped with laser-like vision, this huge bird makes short work of its prey, writes LEONARD CRONIN.

Silent as the waning moon, Australia's largest stealth killer swoops noiselessly from its perch. Legs outstretched, the powerful owl snatches an unsuspecting possum from a branch and crushes its skull between its formidable talons.

The powerful owl is a typical hawk-owl with a hawk-like face and blazing yellow eyes. Like other night-hunting owls, its wing feathers have soft edges that suppress the noise of the wingbeats. This allows it to fly in silence and use its acute vision and hearing to detect the slightest movement in leaves or undergrowth. Its large eyes gather as much light as possible, but their tubular shape prevents them moving, so the owl has to swivel its head to visualise its surroundings. Owls can, in fact, see behind themselves by rotating their head through 270°. Feathers bordering the ear-slits are short and stiff and form moveable flaps so the owl can change the shape of the ear opening and focus its hearing on a particular spot.

Adult powerful owls grow to 60cm long and have a voracious appetite, consuming about 500g of flesh per day. They snatch sugar gliders, greater gliders and ringtail possums from their feeding trees, and supplement them with young brushtail possums, birds and insects, with the occasional ground foray in pursuit of rats and rabbits. Some 250–350 possums are consumed in a year, which means these large owls need an extensive hunting territory with trees that contain hollows. In some areas, their hunting territory might extend to 150oha.

With a wingspan up to 1.35m and a weight of up to 1.7kg, this is the largest owl in Australia.



Young owls learn how to fly at 7-8 weeks old. Sadly, they are sometimes killed by foxes, cats and dogs. Once fledged, they roost near their parents and may stay in the territory for more than a year.

The breeding success of powerful owls depends on old growth trees with hollows large enough to accommodate the mother and chicks. These hollows must be at least 50cm deep and 80cm across, and are only found in trees more than 150 years old. Much of their forest habitat has been cleared or fragmented, and powerful owls are forced to hunt in open areas, such as parks, farmland and suburban areas, surrounding their core breeding sites. They are still widely distributed from Mackay to south-western Victoria, but are listed as vulnerable, although some studies suggest numbers are increasing.

Powerful owls mate for life, and this may mean a 30-year relationship. They start to nest and breed in May, usually laying two eggs, and most of the young are beginning to hatch now.

These birds are extremely secretive and, apart from the persistent 'woohoo' call of the adult, especially during breeding season, give few clues to their whereabouts. Sometimes their favourite roosting sites are revealed by a whitened patch on the forest floor with grisly remains of the hunt: pellets of excreted fur and bone. 