

# Australian Owlet-nightjar

*Aegotheles cristatus*

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This is the usual view of an Australian Owlet-nightjar for most people (photo: Steph Owen)

## They are not nightjars!

Owlet-nightjars are found only in Australia and the New Guinea / New Caledonia region. In comparison to the globally-widespread “true nightjars”, they have shorter wings and a longer tail – these are adaptations for highly manoeuvrable flight. Also, their legs and feet allow them to be adept at ground-foraging, unlike the true nightjars.

They catch their insect prey either in the air or on the ground, using perch-sally and perch-pounce hunting methods.

## Description

The Australian Owlet-nightjar is Australia’s smallest and perhaps most widespread night bird, found in all woodland and forest habitats, except rainforest. It is often heard and has distinctive and readily-recognised calls, which help observers to track it down at night. Daytime sightings are

infrequent because birds typically spend the day in a tree hollow. However, they sometimes sun themselves at the entrance to the hollow especially on winter mornings. Also, they will sometimes emerge from their hollow for a look-see if some sort of disturbance is happening.

There are four morphs – dark grey, pale grey, orange, and grey-orange (grey with orange face and collar). Birds are darker and less rufous in cooler regions, paler and more rufous in drier regions. Although their plumage is variable, all adult birds have large eyes and long rictal bristles located above a small dark bill, and most morphs also have a black stripe running through the eye as far as the nape, a dark central crown stripe, and a pale hind-collar. The latter features are subdued in the pale grey morph.

In flight, the wings are rounded, and the tail is barred. Males and females look very similar and there is no reliable way to tell them apart. Juveniles undergo a partial moult soon after fledging, followed by a complete moult to adult plumage at the end of the first year. In the juvenile and immature birds, the markings on the head are subdued and poorly defined, usually without any distinct striping.

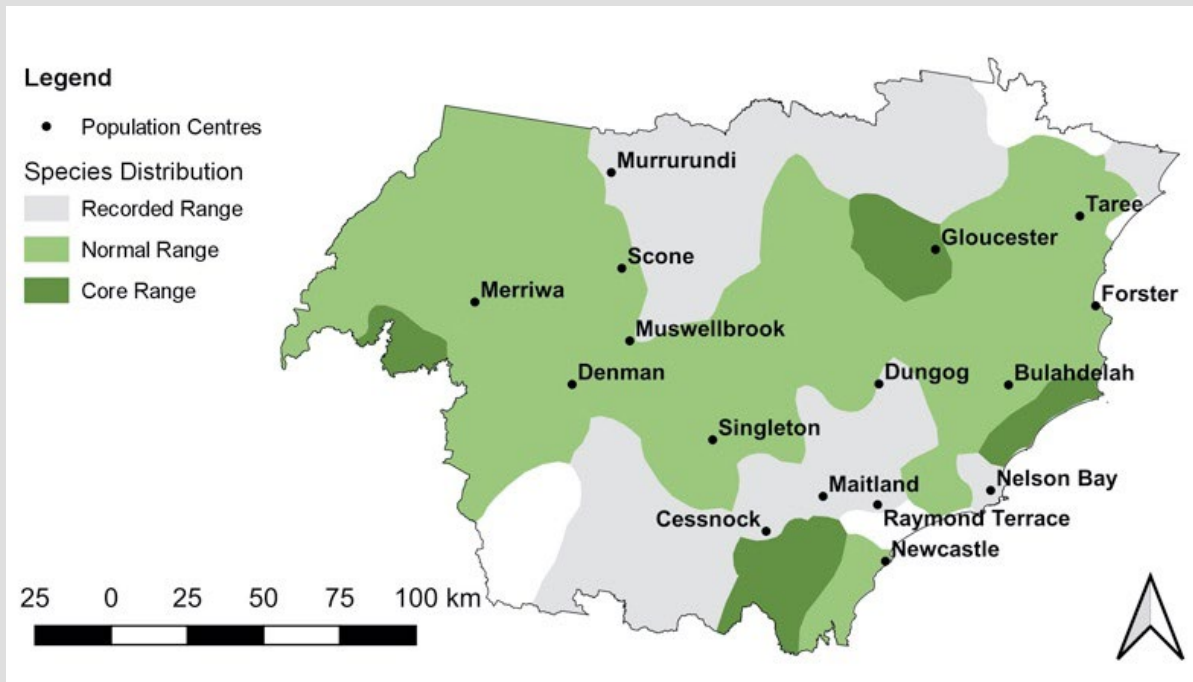


A daytime view of a pale grey morph bird, showing the blackish crown stripe and black stripes through the eyes (photo: Mick Roderick)

## Regional status

The Australian Owlet-nightjar is a widely distributed resident of the Hunter

Region, absent only from rainforest areas and the highly-urbanised parts of the lower Hunter Valley. They can be heard (and, sometimes, seen) at night in almost any location.



Hunter Region distribution of Australian Owlet-nightjar (map produced by Dan Williams)

## Sub-species

Two are recognised: *tasmanicus*, slightly smaller and restricted to Tasmania, and the nominate subspecies *cristatus* which occurs across all of mainland Australia. In the early 20th Century, the north-western Australian version was treated as a separate species (known as Rufous Nightjar *A. rufa*).

## About the name

### Australian Owlet-nightjar

Gould considered it to be a nightjar and named it the Owlet Nightjar because of its smaller size. In fact, it is more closely related to the swifts. There are ten extant species of Owlet-Nightjar (and one extinct – the New Zealand species); ours is the Australian version.

Before Gould's intervention there were many delightful alternative names, including various versions involving Goatsucker, also Fairy Owl and Moth Owl (both of those reflecting the bird's small size and general cuteness).

"Nightjar" is believed to be onomatopoeic for the churring courtship call of the European Nightjar. An old alternative name was "nightchurr".

### *Aegotheles cristatus*

The genus derives from the Greek word *aigothelas*, which in turn is a

portmanteau word from *aigo* (goat) and *thelazo* (to suckle). Thus, it is called “goatsucker”, which arises from the ancient belief that nightjars sucked milk from goats at night (e.g. as Pliny wrote in c 77AD). As an aside, the genus *Caprimulgus* for the true nightjars derives from the Latin equivalent term for goatsucker.

The specific name is from the Latin *cristatus* meaning “crested”. This refers to the bristly rictal feathers above the bill (however, all ten of the known owl-nightjar species possess this feature!).



A daytime view of the orange morph (photo: Dan Herbert)

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