

# Australian Boobook

*Ninox boobook*

#7 JULY 2025



Hunter Bird  
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



An adult Australian Boobook (photo: Gary Tong)

## General Comments

The various boobook species are the smallest of Australia's owls but that still makes them large birds – they stand at 300-350mm and can weigh as much as 370g. Males and females appear identical but females are slightly larger and are usually the heavier. Birds in the Hunter Region have dark brown to pale sandy-brown upperparts with white to off-white streaking or spots (or both) and white underparts with varying dark streaking and spots. The large eyes (for nocturnal hunting) are greenish-yellow and are set within dark eye-patches, creating an impression of an X-shaped face.

The call, often heard in suitable habitat and carrying for long distances, is a distinctive *book book* or *boo book*, with the second note lower pitched and emphasised.

Only the females incubate. Compared to adults, young birds have more streaking or spotting (that's age-dependent) in the crown and paler irises and legs/feet. They reach full adult plumage at 3-4 years of age.

Australian Boobooks are carnivorous, taking invertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, but mostly small birds and mammals. They are nocturnal/crepuscular but sometimes are active before sunset on dull days and occasionally until slightly after dawn. They mostly operate by perch-hunting – they sit on an elevated perch and search an area by sound and by sight, and they catch their prey by sally-strike (airborne prey) or sally-pounce (ground-based prey).

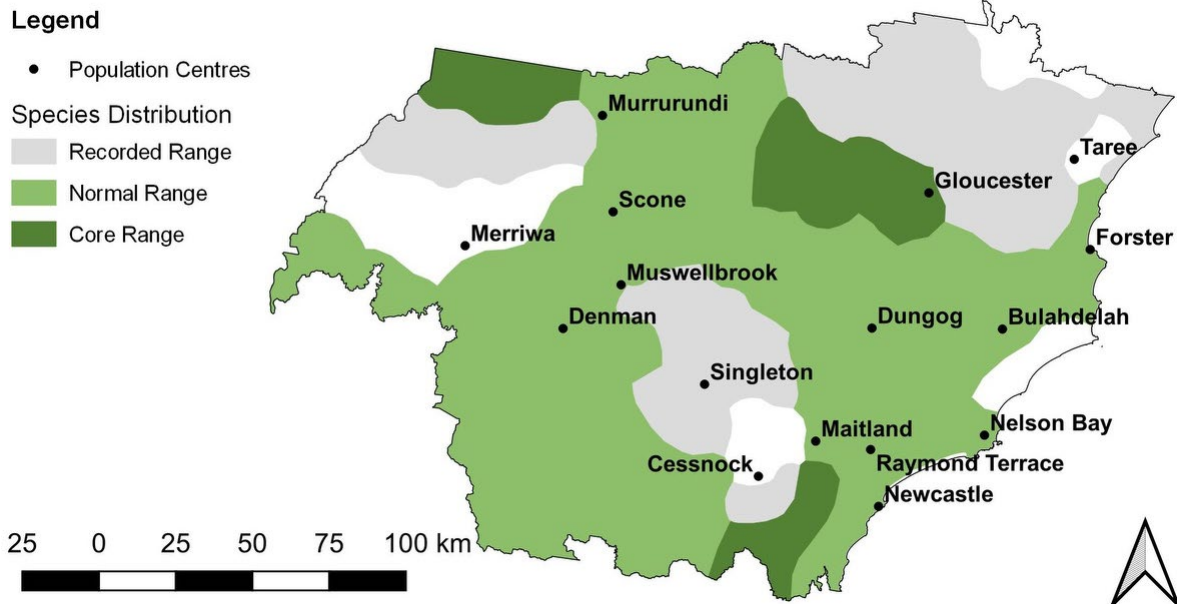


An adult Australian Boobook emerging from a tree hollow in Cameron Park (photo: Rebecca Citroni)

### Regional Status

The Australian Boobook is a common resident of the Hunter Region, occurring in all well-wooded areas. The areas with fewer records, in the distribution map below, probably reflect there having been less night-time survey effort and/or under-reporting of records from private property.

Despite it being a nocturnal species, there are frequent breeding records (usually of adult birds feeding fledged youngsters).



Distribution of the Australian Boobook in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams).

## Sub-species

There are three subspecies – *lurida* (found in north-east Queensland rainforest), *ocellata* (occurring in much of mainland Australia) and the nominate subspecies *boobook*, the South-eastern Boobook. The range for the latter is mainly Victoria, New South Wales and eastern Queensland, and the south-eastern parts of South Australia. Subspecies *boobook* is the largest of the three, while *lurida* is the smallest and darkest. The *ocellata* birds are rich red-brown in southern Australia but much paler in northern Australia.

## Confusion with frogmouths

Soon after European settlement, the identities of two common Australian night birds, Australian Boobook and Tawny Frogmouth, became blurred in the minds of many of the general public. The boobook's two-note call was heard regularly but the bird wasn't seen so often, especially in daylight. Conversely, it was not uncommon to see a frogmouth roosting in the daytime but people didn't always pick up its low deep call at night. As a result, many people thought it was the frogmouth making the night call they were hearing – hence the common name for it became “mopoke” (as a phonetic of the call). There's probably still some confusion around, amongst the non-birders.

## About the name

Australian Boobook

“Boobook” is from the well-known book-book call of our bird. John Gould referred to “... a native name, Buck-buck” in his description of it. For a long

time, it was called the Southern Boobook, reflecting the geographic distribution and differentiating it from the Northern Boobook that is found in parts of Indonesia etc. The taxonomy of this genus has since been revised substantially and the new AviList separates Southern Boobook into Australian and Tasmanian Boobook plus the New Zealand one, now named as Morepork. Similarly, the Northern Boobook now is treated as several separate species in the AviList. There is also a Christmas Island Boobook, with only a limited distribution.

### *Ninox boobook*

The genus *Ninox* translates as “sparrowhawk-owl”, and is formed from a combination of the now-defunct genera *Nisus* (some of the sparrowhawks) and *Noctua* (some of the owls). Using the same derivation, some of the *Ninox* species used to be called hawk-owls. For a long time, the species name was *novaeseelandiae* (which is Latin for New Zealand) where the first specimen was collected, of what was then treated as a subspecies. When the two species were split, taxonomists had to come up with a new species name for our bird. It seems they were short on ideas.



An adult Australian Boobook (photo: Steve Merrett)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 Text by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of BirdLife Australia's HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Volumes 1-3 of the NSW Field Atlassers' Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide • James Jobling (2010). The Helm Dictionary of Scientific Names. Christopher Helm, London.

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