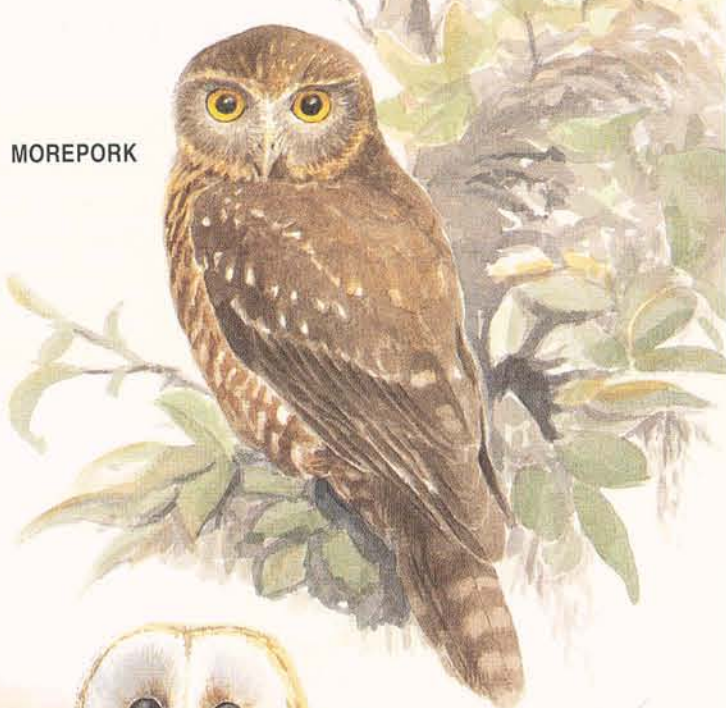


Owls are mainly nocturnal birds of prey. They are chunky, and usually streaked brown and buff and spotted white. Large head and flat-faced with large eyes in a paler facial disc. Bill short and hooked. Powerful feet and talons. Sexes alike; females slightly larger. Plumage is soft, and so flight is silent. Voice ranges from plaintive calls to harsh screeches.

**BARN OWL** *Tyto alba*

Rare Australian vagrant

34 cm. Large pale buff and white owl; looks white when seen at dusk or in headlights. Heart-shaped white facial disc. Call a rasping screech: 'skiirrr'. **Habitat:** Almost worldwide in open country. [Sp 277]



MOREPORK

LITTLE OWL



BARN OWL

KOOKABURRA



KINGFISHER

imm

**BARN OWLS**

**Tytonidae**

10 species; 1 is a rare vagrant to New Zealand.

The barn owls are mainly nocturnal birds of prey. They have a large head and very flexible neck, so that the whole of the head can be rotated to look for prey at the side or the rear. The large eyes, directed forward, give good binocular vision in low-intensity light. The dark eyes are set in a white, heart-shaped disc of short 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 with needle-sharp talons. Unlike typical owls, the inner toe is as long as the middle toe,

and the claw of the middle toe has comb-like serrations. As their plumage is soft and wing feathers have softened edges, the flight of barn 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.

**277. BARN OWL** *Tyto alba*

Plate 63

**Size:** 34 cm, 350 g  
**Geographical variation:** More than 30 subspecies, of which *delicatula* of Australia and the Solomon Islands reaches New Zealand as a vagrant.  
**Distribution:** The most widely distributed landbird, being found almost worldwide. They are widespread in mainland Australia but rare in Tasmania. Vagrants naturally reach New Zealand: Barrytown (1947), Haast River mouth (1955), Runanga (1960), South Kaipara Head (1986) and New Plymouth (1990). Others are believed to have come from Aus-

tralia as stowaways in aircraft undercarriage: live birds at Papatoetoe, near Auckland Airport (1983), and at Whenuapai RNZAF Base (1992); probably the same bird was seen six weeks later on Little Barrier Island (1992).  
**Behaviour:** At night, Barn Owls are seen sitting upright on fenceposts or branches, or are caught in car headlight beams like a buoyant white ghost. Their call is a menacing, long-drawn-out, rasping screech 'skiirrr'.  
**Reading:** Gill, B.J. & Turbott, E.G. 1984. *Notornis* 31: 177-179.