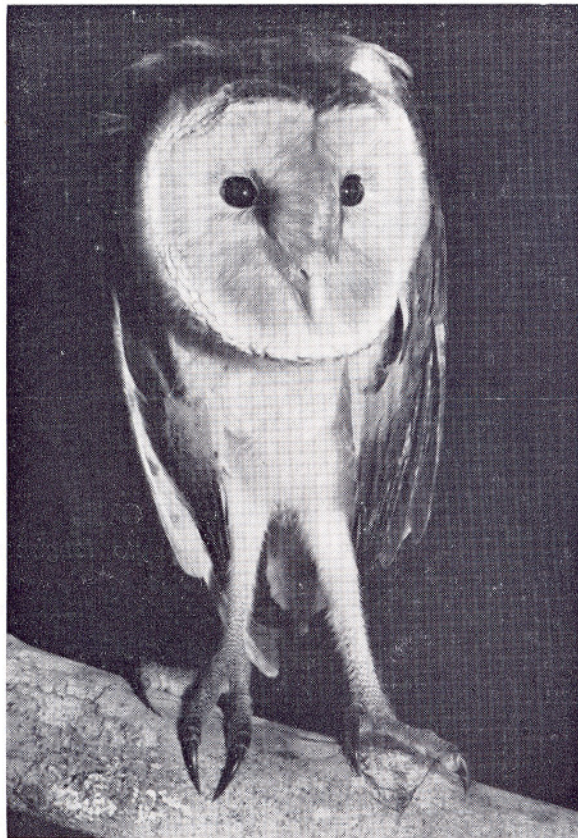


'MASKED' OWLS



- *Grass Owl showing the sparse hair-like feathering on the lower tarsus and toes.*

Photo: E. Slater

'Masked' Owls *Tyto* spp.

Methods of distinguishing the Australian species of *Tyto* are given. No attempt has been made to separate either the different colour forms of the Masked Owl *Tyto novaehollandiae* or *T. castanops*, which is generally regarded as a Tasmanian form of the mainland species.

A general indication of size has been given rather than absolute measurements. Too few sexed specimens were available to establish possible sex-related plumage differences.

The genus *Tyto* is distinguished from all other

owls by the clearly discernible heart-shaped facial disc, by the inner and middle toes being equal in length, and by the serrated or pectinated inner side of the middle toe claw (These serrations are absent in nestlings).

BARN OWL

Tyto alba

Length: 320-370 mm

Wing: 270-290 mm

Tarsus: 53-64 mm. Feathered to about half-way, the remainder and toes being covered with sparse hair-like feathers.

Inside claw: 17-21 mm

Crown and back: Feathers ash-grey, each with a brown spot just below the greyish white tip. The overall effect is of dark brown spots on an ash-grey background.

GRASS OWL

Tyto longimembris

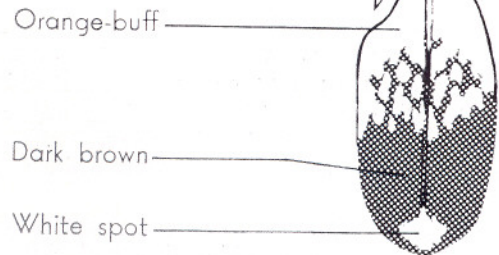
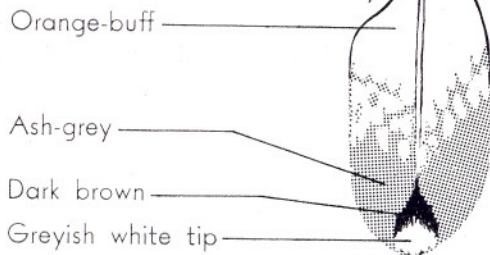
Length: 330 mm (one measured).

Wing: 320 mm (one measured).

Tarsus: 78-80 mm (two measured); larger than in Barn Owl. Feathered to less than half way, the remainder and toes being covered with sparse hair-like feathers.

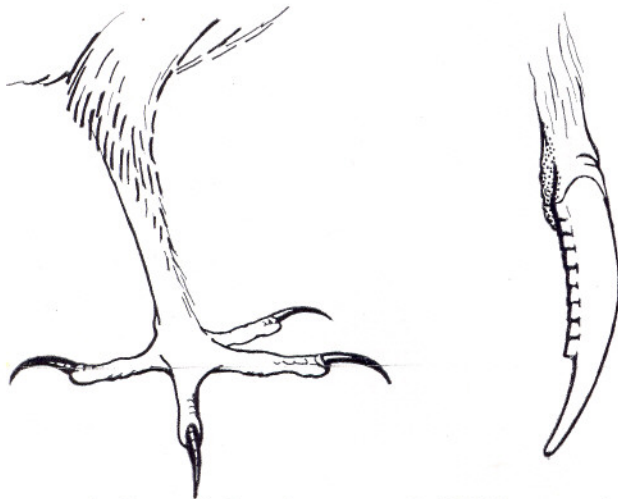
Inside toe claw: 22 mm (one measured).

Crown and back: Feathers dark brown near tip with some orange buff towards base, the latter becoming more obvious with wear. Tips clear white, in contrast with greyish white of Barn Owl, so the overall effect is of white spots on a dark brown background.



BARN OWL

GRASS OWL



• *Barn Owl and Grass Owl.*

• *Middle toe, showing pectinated inner side of claw.*



• *Masked Owl and Sooty Owl*

Drawings by J. Boddy

MASKED OWL

Tyto novaehollandiae

Length: 355-460 mm. Males are smaller than females; the smallest birds are about the same size as larger individuals of the Barn and Grass Owls.

Wing: 305-385 mm

Tarsus: 62-79 mm, usually over 70 mm. Fully feathered to the toes which are well covered with hair-like feathers.

Inside toe claw: 25-36 mm

Crown and back: LIGHT PHASE: Feathers dark brown speckled and irregularly spotted white, with white tips; each with a broad central band of pale to orange buff. The overall effect is of dark brown irregularly speckled white.

DARK PHASE: Feathers generally dark brown with small white tips and little or no speckling; each with a broad central band of deep orange buff. The overall effect is of small white spots on dark brown. It is possible that plumage phase is an age-related character in mainland birds.

SOOTY OWL

Tyto tenebricosa

Length: 335-490 mm. As with Masked Owl, small Sooty Owls may resemble larger individuals of the Barn and Grass Owls in size.

Wing: 263-340 mm

Tarsus: 63-80 mm, fully feathered to toes; the latter covered with sparse hairlike feathers.

Inside toe claw: 27-37 mm

Crown and back: Feathers dark brown, each with a pale brownish grey base (orange buff in Masked Owl) and white tip. Overall effect is dark brown with small white spots.

DIAGNOSTIC CHARACTERS

This dark brown owl is at once separated from all other Australian owls with dark underparts by the *Tyto* generic characters of heart-shaped facial disc, pectinated middle claw, and inner and middle toes of equal length.



• Young Masked Owl showing fully feathered tarsus.

Photo: A. J. Elliott