

# AN EXAMPLE OF MELANISTIC PLUMAGE IN THE TAWNY FROGMOUTH *Podargus strigoides*

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The cryptically plumaged Tawny Frogmouth *Podargus strigoides* is common and widely distributed throughout Australia and is also reasonably well represented in natural history collections worldwide (Cleere 1998; Higgins 1999; Holyoak 1999, 2001). Although the grey, chestnut and rufous colour morphs of this species are well known, only three examples of aberrant plumage have so far been documented, two of leucistic individuals and one of a greyish morph bird with pure white feathers scattered throughout its plumage (Cleere 2002; Higgins 1999). A further case of unusual plumage in this species can now be recorded, concerning a rather remarkable specimen held in the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh.

The specimen (NMSZ 1993.14.257) is a melanistic, adult female that was presented to the museum as one of a large collection of bird skins by the Zoological Society of London in 1993. The Zoological Society originally purchased the bird from J. B. Chapman (presumably a dealer/collector) on 21 April 1922. The Zoo's post-mortem log (PM No. 1086/28) indicates that the bird died with chronic nephritis on 3 December 1928. Although the specimen appears to be entirely blackish, a more thorough description is as follows.

Head, neck, back, rump and upper tail coverts blackish-brown, all feathers being tipped black. Loes and ear-coverts black. Chin, throat and breast blackish-brown, indistinctly barred and spotted pale buff and greyish-white. Belly, flanks and under tail coverts blackish-brown barred pale buff and greyish-white, bars slightly bolder than on rest of underparts and formed by large spots on distal portions of feathers. Primaries and secondaries blackish-brown with indistinct pale buff blotches at tips. Tertiaries blackish-brown tipped black. Wing coverts blackish-brown, indistinctly barred with greyish-white and greyish-buff speckling. Tail blackish-brown barred with greyish-white and greyish-buff speckling, the bars on the underside being

bolder and more greyish-white. Wing length 274 millimetres; tail length 174 millimetres.

Melanism appears to be rare in Australian birds (Lepschi 1990) and the above is the first example of this plumage abnormality to be recorded in the Tawny Frogmouth. According to Sage (1962), melanism in species that do not normally produce a melanistic phase is 'abnormal melanism', although no records of correlated or lethal conditions were associated with this abnormality. The Tawny Frogmouth is a nocturnal species that relies on crypsis to escape detection at its nest and roost sites, and it seems possible that a melanistic plumage would be disadvantageous in these environments. When active however, this species often employs a perch and pounce technique when hunting, and a dark plumage could then prove to be beneficial.

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