

Who cares about WA owls?

October 9 2017, by samille Mitchell, Particle

Meet the first man studying owls in the Peel-Harvey Estuary.

When ornithologist Graham Fulton set off into the forest to count owls as part of his work with Murdoch University, he simply intended to gather data on their numbers. You see, no one had officially recorded owls here before.

But, sitting under starry [night](#) skies listening for owl calls, Graham often got more than he bargained for.

Ruffling some feathers

He certainly didn't expect to be ducking bullets from hunters in the nearby bush. Graham assumes the hunters must have mistaken him for a kangaroo, and their bullets sent him racing back to his car.

He also didn't count on being seduced by the night skies, the track of satellites across the heavens and the beauty of the owls themselves as they swooped in with a silent rush of movement.

"There were glorious sunsets and beautiful cool nights sitting under the trees counting owls," Graham says. "It was an enormous pleasure—certainly better than watching TV."

We aren't all nocturnal

Graham was intrigued to determine how owls were faring. He knew of

various studies showing their numbers were declining in the east and overseas, but what about here? No one had previously researched owls in the Peel-Harvey region.

Why not?

"People are frightened of the dark," Graham says. "There are many birdwatchers out there, but not many go out at night."

And so begins the game of spotlight ...

Graham visited seven sites in the Peel-Harvey Estuary on 42 different nights over a year. He'd often trudge well away from his car into the forest to reach areas likely to provide a home for owls.

He'd then set up a pocket-sized MP3 player and speakers with amplifiers attached and press play. He played prerecorded owl calls in an attempt to lure owls to the area.

The first played was the call of the smallest owl, the southern boobook. Playing the calls of larger species first would scare of their smaller cousins.

He then played the calls of the eastern barn owl, barking owl and masked owl.

Each call sounded for 5 minutes, followed by 5 minutes of silence. During the 40 minutes of broadcasting, Graham would shine his torchlight through the trees searching for owls.

Over the 42 nights, he recorded 23 sightings of the southern boobook and a single masked owl.

He also heard the calls of three tawny frogmouths but didn't sight any.

So what does it mean? Are owls doing OK?

Are owls doing OK?

"I got good numbers for boobooks but just the one masked owl, though it's a big bird so would inhabit a large area. You really wouldn't expect to find many," Graham says.

"There's an assumption that owls are in decline because of habitat loss and habitat change, and it's probably a good assumption. But we need a lot more data to understand if there's a decline. [This \[study\]](#) will serve as baseline data for future studies."

This article first appeared on [Particle](#), a science news website based at Scitech, Perth, Australia. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by Particle

Citation: Whoo cares about WA owls? (2017, October 9) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-10-whoo-wa-owls.html>

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