

Dietary Items of the Rufous Owl *Ninox rufa* on the Atherton Tableland, North Queensland

The diet of the Rufous Owl *Ninox rufa* is poorly known in Queensland, with most prey records obtained in the coastal lowlands. Previous dietary studies and records throughout the Owl's Australian range emphasise the importance of prey other than arboreal marsupials in its diet (Higgins 1999). This note presents dietary records from the Atherton Tableland, north-eastern Queensland.

On 10 August 1998 a presumed Rufous Owl pellet, measuring 92 × 38 mm, was collected outside GH's residence in Malanda (17°26'S, 145°32'E). The pellet contained only the fur and bones of a Striped Possum *Dactylopsila trivirgata*. The house is in a small clearing (<0.4 ha) in rainforest, and the pellet was found beneath a 14 m Pink Ash *Alphitonia petriei* (a pioneer rainforest tree). GH had heard a Rufous Owl calling at this site only once in 10 years, but responses to taped calls have revealed that the Rufous Owl is widespread on the Atherton Tableland (Kanowski 1998).

The size and characteristics of the pellet (i.e. lack of mucous coating) ruled out the only other owl of this site and habitat, namely the Lesser Sooty Owl *Tyto multipunctata*.

On 10 September 1998 a mass of Rufous Owl pellet debris was collected from Emerald Creek Falls (17°02'S, 145°01'E) near Mareeba. Rufous Owls are regularly reported roosting in this 25 m riparian Drooping Paperbark *Melaleuca leucadendron* forest, and a pair was present on the day. The pellets contained the fur and bones of Common Brushtail Possum *Trichosurus vulpecula*, Common Ringtail Possum *Pseudocheirus peregrinus*, and Sugar Glider *Petaurus breviceps*. On this day a Rufous Owl was observed flying with difficulty for a distance of approximately 15 m carrying a fully grown Brushtail Possum (northern Coppery Brushtail form), and another freshly dead, uneaten possum was found nearby, at this roost-site.

Striped, Common Ringtail and Common Brushtail Possum have not previously been recorded in the diet of the Rufous Owl, although the Northern Brushtail Possum *Trichosurus arnhemensis* has been recorded as eaten in the Northern Territory (Higgins 1999).

These records suggest that the Rufous Owl preys heavily on arboreal marsupials in the highland forests of northern Queensland, and in this respect resembles the Powerful Owl *Ninox strenua* of southern forests (Higgins 1999). This result is consistent with the finding that the distribution of Rufous Owls in the highlands of north-eastern Queensland is associated with the abundance of the Coppery Brushtail Possum (Kanowski 1998).

We thank Tony Rose (Associate, the Australian Museum) and Steve Van Dyck (Queensland Museum) for analysing the owl pellets, and Andrew Ley and Graham Cam for reviewing a draft.

References

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Kanowski, J. (1998), 'The abundance of the Rufous Owl *Ninox rufa* in upland and highland rainforests of north-east Queensland', *Emu* **98**, 58–61.

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