

Description of Juvenile Fearful Owl *Nesasio solomonensis*

The Fearful Owl *Nesasio solomonensis* is one of the least known owls of the world and possibly one of the rarest. A photograph of a distant adult is included in del Hoyo *et al.* (1999, p. 150), the only previously published photograph of the species. The taxonomic affinities of this monospecific genus are unclear. König *et al.* (1999) commented that it shares features with the recently extinct Laughing Owl *Sceloglaux albifacies* of New Zealand, in terms of general appearance of plumage, strong feet and bill, and to some extent voice. However, *Nesasio* is generally regarded as being related to the 'eared' owls *Asio* of Eurasia, Africa and the Americas, whereas *Sceloglaux* is regarded as related to *Ninox* of the Australasian Region (del Hoyo *et al.* 1999, König *et al.* 1999).

The Fearful Owl is classified as Vulnerable, and regarded as rare and probably threatened by forest destruction (del Hoyo *et al.* 1999). It is confined to three large islands: Bougainville in Papua New Guinea, and Choiseul and Santa Isabel in the Solomon Islands (König *et al.* 1999). Until recently its nesting habits were undescribed (del Hoyo *et al.* 1999), but unsourced information in König *et al.* (1999) reported it as nesting in cavities in large forest trees, sometimes on the edge of native gardens, and occasionally on epiphytes in large forest trees. The juvenile has not been described.

The juvenile Fearful Owl pictured (Plate 79) was observed and photographed by RHL on Bougainville (North Solomons Province, Papua New Guinea) on 16 July 1987. The owlet was in the garden of a village house west of Panguna, where it had been taken for care after its nest-tree was felled in lowland forest north of Arowa, on the east coast of the island. The owlet was lively, walking and bouncing vigorously about on the ground and perching on railings as shown. It was neither fearsome nor timid, and did not call during the short period of observation. Its subsequent fate is not known.

Plate 79 and two other photographs show the owlet to have long, unbarred downy juvenile plumage on the head and underparts, a dark facial mask, and an *Asio*-like bill. The emerging dorsal and wing feathers were barred light and dark brown. Its irides were orange-yellow, cere blue-grey, bill black, and feet grey. It did not resemble fledgling Old World *Asio* owls such as the Long-eared Owl *A. otus* and Short-eared Owl *A. flammeus*, which have short, finely barred downy plumage with a hint of 'ear' tufts (del Hoyo *et al.* 1999, König *et al.* 1999, RHL pers. obs.). The owlet's morphology may throw light on the Fearful Owl's relationships, particularly when the fledging plumage of poorly known *Asio* owls, such as those in Africa and South America, is better documented.

The only information concerning the owlet's nest-site was that it was in a hollow tree in lowland forest (E. Harding pers. comm.). Harding has observed Fearful Owls mainly in the south of Bougainville. He also reported that young Fearful Owls are occasionally sold as pets in local markets, usually when their nest-trees are felled for unrelated purposes as in this case.

Thanks to Elliott Harding for his information; to Pam Ruppin, Peter Neville, Remy Barena and Bob Corbett for hospitality and assistance to RHL on Bougainville; and to colleagues for encouraging publication. Price Webb and Andrew Ley commented helpfully on a draft.



Fledgling Fearful Owl *Nesasio solomonensis* from Arowa, Bougainville Island, Papua New Guinea, 16 July 1987

Plate 79

Photo: Richard Loyn

References

- del Hoyo, J., Elliott, A. & Sargatal, J. (Eds) (1999), *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, vol. 5, BirdLife/Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.
- König, C., Weick, F. & Becking, J.-H., (1999), *Owls, A Guide to the Owls of the World*, Pica Press, Mountfield (Sussex, U.K.).

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