## Review—

### *Australian High Country Owls* by Jerry Olsen

CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne, 2011. Softcover, 17 × 24.5 cm, 376 pp., tables, graphs, maps, colour and black-and-white photographs. RRP $70.

Jerry Olsen's book on Australian owls is a unique and significant publication. Although the title gives the impression that it covers only the owls of Australia's upland areas, the scope and vision of this book are far greater. It takes the reader on a journey through the world of owls and owl research in Australia and in many overseas destinations. Indeed it has an even wider perspective, drawing in examples on the biology and evolution of diurnal raptors to illustrate relevant points.

The book has 45 chapters divided into five main sections. The first three chapters briefly cover the characteristics of owls, the genus *Ninox* and the Southern Boobook, respectively. The Southern Boobook is the species that receives the most coverage in the book. This introduction is followed by a series of chapters on studying owls. Here, the author begins to outline how his approach to understanding owls differs from much of the Australian owl literature. Jerry Olsen makes the case for the need to study owl behaviour to fully understand owl biology, rather than relying on inference and deduction based on call surveys. In many ways this book is an illustration of the wonders and scientific value of observing owls and understanding the biology of individual species in the field. The following sections on 'Diet and hunting' and 'Breeding' cover a range of Australian species, and several of the iconic Northern Hemisphere species including the Spotted, Long-eared, Great Horned, Great Grey and Snowy Owls. However, the main focus in these sections is on the Southern Boobook and Powerful Owl. There is also a chapter covering the diets of the forest-dwelling *Tyto* species, the Masked and Sooty Owls. A highlight here is a group of chapters covering the breeding life of the Boobooks of the Australian Capital Territory, which the author and colleagues have studied over a long period. The penultimate section looks at conservation, again with examples from Australia and overseas. Finally, there is a section on the owls of Wallacea with a particular emphasis on the island of Sumba.

Jerry Olsen succeeds in making this a very entertaining and educational book. He does this by writing short and sharp chapters, with each one discussing a single concept or issue, and then moving on to the next topic. Chapters are rarely more than 6–7 pages in length (hence, 45 chapters is not a big read). Each chapter is well illustrated with a combination of owl images and data tables and figures. A large collection of colour plates is presented in the centre of the book.

A highlight of the book is the way in which the author is able to provide both information on the biology of owls and, at a much more personal level, to take the reader into the field to experience the world of owls. The reader learns a lot about the behaviour and ecology of various species through the author's accounts of particular nesting pairs or other experiences in the wild. The author has decades of

experience watching and studying owls across the globe, and he is able to impart much of the excitement and hard work of carrying out research on owls through the chapters of the book. I found this approach very effective. I also enjoyed the insights into the world of owl research and owl researchers, particularly those involving overseas scientists. It was good to see important but often largely ignored figures in Australian owl research, particularly Merv Goddard, being mentioned and their significance covered.

I do have a number of criticisms of some parts of this book; however, I make them while acknowledging that any changes would not alter the positive impact of this publication. First, I think that the placement of a couple of the chapters should change. For example, the final chapter titled 'Eviction' is on the ACT Boobooks and is a nice conclusion to the work. However, it appears at the end of the section on Wallacea. Second, although the author uses the opportunity to introduce the reader to a wide range of ecological and evolutionary theory, I found that the coverage of evolution presents a very competition-focussed approach to the natural world. Examples of this appear on page 132 (species that compete with Boobooks for prey) and page 170 (species that compete with Boobooks for nest-hollows). There are other perspectives which could have been covered, such as the autecological approach that emphasises the importance of studying the ecology of individual species. Lastly, I would have enjoyed seeing inclusion of a more modern and up-to-date literature. As an example, information on the diet of Long-eared Owls (p. 74) has advanced significantly over the past ~30 years since the work of the two authors given in the book, Marti (1976) and Marks (1984). A similar comment could be made about a range of other species.

In conclusion, this book does an excellent job of showcasing owl research as a passionate scientific endeavour: one that attracts deep fascination and where much remains to be learnt. It will be of value and interest to anyone who studies or enjoys watching owls. Perhaps more importantly, I can see this book igniting the passion of the next generation of owl researchers. That will be a significant achievement.

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