

BIRD IN THE HAND

by H. J. de S. Disney, drawings by (Mrs) Janet Body, Australian Museum, Sydney.

Genus Tyto

This "Bird in the Hand" gives methods of readily distinguishing the species of Australian Tyto. No attempt is made to separate the different colour forms of the Masked Owl (*Tyto novaehollandiae*) nor to separate the Tasmanian form (*T. castanops*) which is generally considered to be a race of the mainland species.

The measurements must not be taken as absolute, but are given to indicate the general size range. Sex differences are not given because of insufficient sexed specimens.

The genus Tyto is distinguished from all other

owls by the clearly marked heart-shaped facial disc, by the inner and middle toe of the same length, and by the serrated or pectinated inner side of the middle toe. (These serrations are absent in nestlings).

BARN OWL (*Tyto alba*)

Length: 320-370 mm (12½-14 inches)

Wing: 270-290 mm (10½-11½ inches)

Tarsus: 53-64 mm (5¼-2½ inches)

Inside toe claw: 17-21 mm

Crown and back: Ash-grey feathers with greyish white tips. Each feather has a brown spot near the tip, giving an effect of dark brown spots on an ash-grey background.

Tarsus: Less than 70 mm. Feathering extends about half way down, the remainder of the tarsus and toes being covered with sparse hair-like feathers.

GRASS OWL (*Tyto longimembris*)

Length: 330 mm (13 inches)

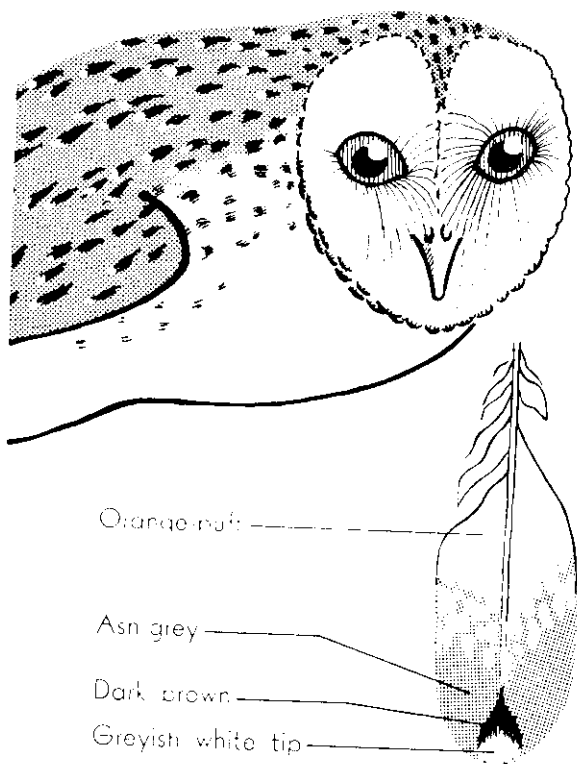
Wing: 320 mm (12½ inches)—one measured

Tarsus: 78-80 mm (about 3 inches — two measured)

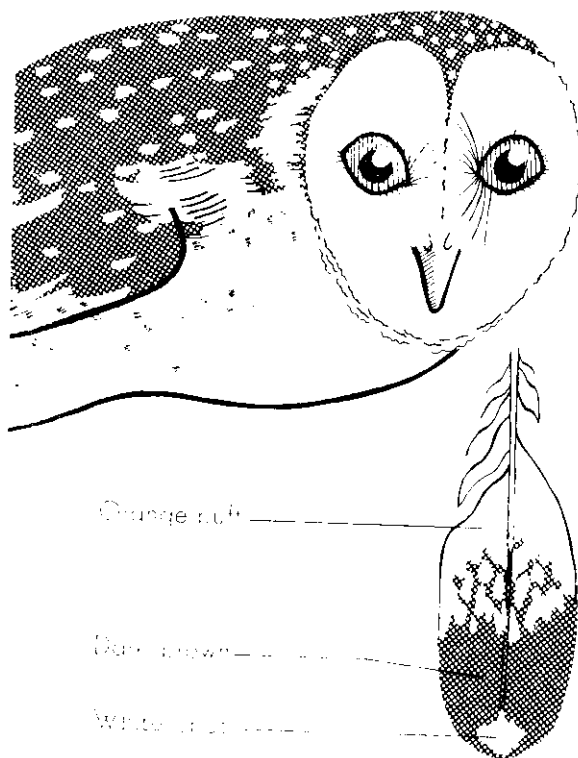
Inside toe claw: 22 mm—one measured

Crown and back: Feathers dark brown near the tip with some orange-buff towards the base; the orange-buff becomes more obvious with wear. The tips are clear white (greyish white in the Barn Owl), giving the effect of white spots on a dark brown background.

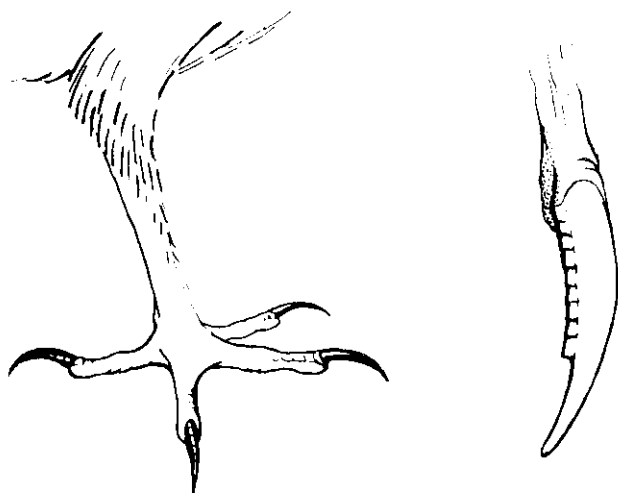
Tarsus: Over 70 mm. Feathering extends not more than half way down, the remainder of the tarsus and toes being covered with sparse hair-like feathers.



• BARN OWL

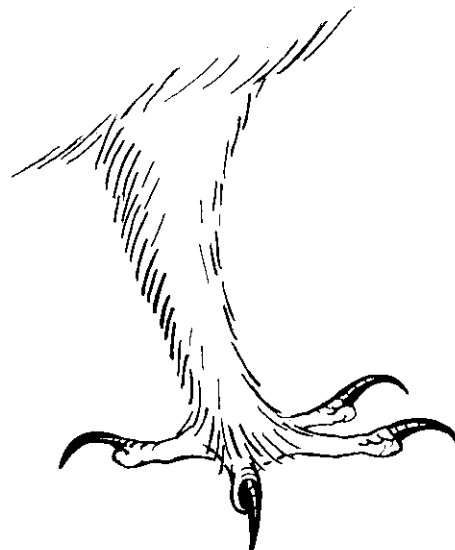


• GRASS OWL



• Barn Owl and Grass Owl

• Pectinated claw on inside of middle toe.



• Masked Owl and Sooty Owl.

MASKED OWL (*Tyto novaehollandiae*)

Length: 355-460 mm (14-18 inches)

Wing: 305-385 mm (12-15½ inches)

Tarsus: 62-79 mm, usually over 70 mm (2½-3¼ inches)

Inside toe claw: 25-36 mm

Note: Males are smaller than females and the smallest birds are close to the larger Barn and Grass Owls in size.

Crown and back:

Light phase: Feathers generally dark brown speckled white, with white tips and irregular white spots; central portion pale to orange-buff, giving the effect of dark brown irregularly speckled white.

Dark phase: The light phase grades into the dark phase. Feathers generally dark brown with small white tips and little or no white speckling. Centre portion deep orange-buff, giving the effect of small white spots on dark brown.

Tarsus: Fully feathered to the toes. The toes being well covered with hair-like feathers.

SOOTY OWL (*Tyto tenebricosa*)

Length: 335-490 mm (14¼-19¼ inches)

Wing: 263-340 mm (10½-13½ inches)

Tarsus: 63-80 mm (2½-3¼ inches)

Inside toe claws: 27-37 mm

Crown and back: Dark brown, the white tips to the feathers forming small white spots. The base of the feathers pale brownish-grey (orange-buff in the Masked Owl).

Tarsus: Fully feathered to the toes. The toes being covered with sparse hair-like feathers.

In Australia this dark brown owl is at once separated from all other owls with dark underparts, by the *Tyto* generic characters (viz. the heart-shaped facial disc, pectinated middle claw, and the inner and middle toes of the same length).

Note: As with the Masked Owl, the smaller Sooty Owls are close to the larger Barn and Grass Owls in size.



- Young Masked Owl showing the full feathering to the toes. For comparison, a Grass Owl can be seen in "Aust. Bird Watcher", vol. 3, no. 6, p. 197.

Photo: A. J. Elliott