

NAMIBIA BIRD CLUB

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All contributions for *LANIOTURDUS* should be sent to:

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OWLS - *STRIGIFORMES* - EULEN

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Owls are small to large-sized birds of prey. They are not entirely nocturnal hunters and many hunt during daytime, in the evening and early morning. I observed an owlet at Keetmanshoop in December hunting during the hottest time of the day - midday. We find two families of owls in Namibia. The Tytonidae - represented only by the Barn Owl, which is not a typical owl but more closely related to falcons, and the Strigidae - with 10 species in Namibia.

Typical owl characteristics are a large head, short feathered legs, sharp curved claws and flexible toes, hooked beak and large eyes, ringed in an expressive face. Why some owls have yellow or orange eyes and others dark eyes, still remains to be explained; it is, however, thought that the paler eyes are more threatening or have a display function. The main difference between the eyes of owls and those of other birds is that owls have their eyes facing forward and other birds have theirs situated on the side of the head. An owl's field of vision is about 160 degrees compared to 300 degrees in other birds. Owls, however, have the ability to turn their heads 270 degrees. They blink with the upper eye-lid, not as other birds, with the lower eyelid. The bristle hairs at the base of the beak enable them to get and swallow their prey.

The hearing of owls is acute and far more sensitive than that of other birds - this is an important aid in prey location at night. The ears are positioned asymmetrically on the side of the facial disc so they are able to locate their prey more accurately. Their hearing ability is from 50 - 21 000 Hz.

Owls are carnivores, killing prey by stabbing them with the long claws. They have no crop but thin-walled muscular stomachs and their prey is swallowed whole except for large objects. Food remains in stomach for a very short while - a mouse is digested by a Barn Owl in 2 to 2½ hours. Bones, feathers and fur are not digested and these are regurgitated in the form of a pellet.

Owls are territorial and can be found in the same sleeping spot regularly;

hooting, screeching and calling in the same area. Owls do not build nests, but use abandoned nests of other large birds, holes in trees, caves, old buildings or structures and shallow scrapes on the ground or on cliffs. The eggs are mostly rounded and always white. A strong correlation exists between the rate of owl reproduction and availability of food. When there is too little food - owls may not breed at all that season or lay fewer eggs. Given an abundance of food, owls may breed twice or lay more eggs that season. Incubation starts as soon as the first egg is laid and so chicks hatch asynchronously. There is, therefore, a considerable difference in the size between the first and last chick to hatch. Owl chicks develop slowly and they are deaf and have their eyes closed on hatching.

SPECIES OCCURRING IN NAMIBIA

Barn Owl - Schleiereule - *Tyto alba*

Medium-sized, tawny-buffy-grey above; underparts and face white; face is heartshaped with dark, small eyes. Legs are longish with short white feathers. Feeds mainly on rodents, lizards, small birds and insects. Nests in caves, old buildings and structures. Found throughout Namibia, this bird is most often noticed at night when its distinctive, high-pitched, screeching hiss can be heard. Often seen around waterholes in Etosha.

Wood Owl - Woodfordkauz - *Stryx woodfordii*

A medium-sized brownish owl with white-barred under parts; eyes dark with black surrounding feathers making the face look large; wings are spotted white. In Namibia this species is restricted to woodlands and forests of the North (Kunene, Okavango and Caprivi Regions). It feeds mainly on insects, rodents, frogs and small birds. The call is a distinctive series of hoots, usually performed by a pair of birds. They are best seen in the Caprivi where they are common in the Katima Mulilo area and in tall woodlands fringing large rivers.

Marsh Owl - Kapohreule - *Asio capensis*

Medium-sized uniform brown owl with dark eyes and small ear-tufts; buffy windows on wings in flight. Marsh Owls are found widely in Namibia and may turn up anywhere. They are normally only found in the northern third of the country where they occur in grasslands and on the edges of vleis and marshes. They occur on the coast in the Skeleton Coast

Park. They feed mainly on insects, rodents, frogs and small birds. They can often be seen in flying slowly over grasslands and marshes in the late afternoon.

Whitefaced Owl - Weißgesichtohreule - *Otus leucotis*

A small to medium-sized owl with a black outlined white facial disc. It is our only small owl with orange eyes and ear tufts. It is principally a bird of savanna bushveld habitats and is found throughout Namibia. The call is a distinctive bubbling hoot with a loud "who" at the end of the phrase.

African Scops Owl - Zwergohreule - *Otus senegalensis*

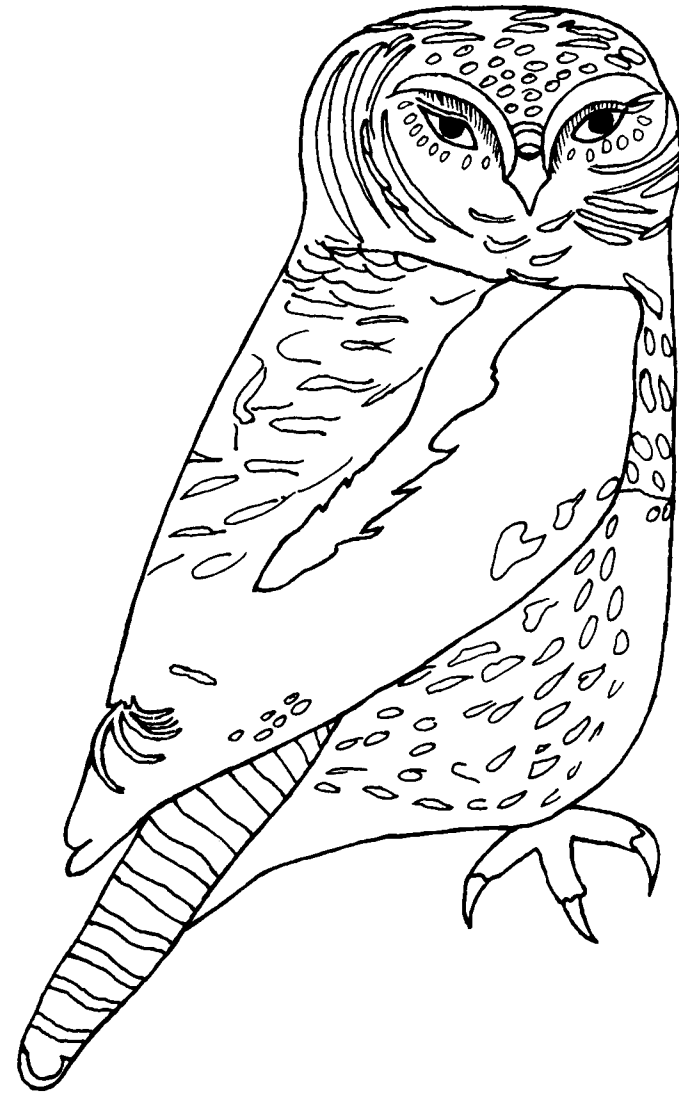
This is the smallest of our owls with ear tufts. It is grey with yellow eyes and often assumes an elongated pose which makes it difficult to see as they often perch on a branch close to the stem of tree. The call is one of the most familiar sounds in the bush - a high pitched purring "Prrrrrup". They breed in natural holes in trees and feed mostly on insects and other arthropods. They are found in almost all woodland habitats and occur throughout Namibia except in the dry West and the South.

Pearlspotted Owl - Perlkauz - *Glaucidium perlatum*

This is one of the most familiar of all our small owls and is distinctive in that it lacks ear tufts. It has two black "false eye" spots on the back of its head and it is streaked not barred on the breast and belly. Like most small owls it feeds mainly on arthropods, but has also been seen catching birds and small reptiles. They nest in natural holes in trees and readily take to nest boxes. The call is a distinctive, protracted whistle which when played back or copied (it is not difficult) will usually pull the nearest owl out to come and investigate. Pearlspotted Owls are found in wooded habitats throughout the country except the coastal Namib. They can frequently be seen at Avis Dam, around Windhoek, the Waterberg, Okaukuejo and Namutoni rest camps.

Barred Owl - Kapkauz - *Glaucidium capense*

This small owl occurs mainly in the North of Namibia but has been recorded South to about Windhoek. It is a small brownish owl with yellow eyes and no ear-tufts - it is best distinguished from the Pearlspotted Owl by its barred belly and slightly larger size. It favours tall woodland habitats with dense undergrowth. It can often be heard calling during the day.



Barred Owl (Aidan McGivern)

Pel's Fishing Owl - Fischeule - *Scotopelia peli*

One of the most sought after birds in southern Africa, Pel's Fishing Owl has a limited distribution in Namibia. They only occur on the large rivers in the North-East of the country and there they are rare. The best places to see it are in the Buffalo area, opposite the Mahango Game Reserve and along the Zambezi. It is uncertain as to whether they have been recorded on the Kwando River. They are seemingly absent from the Kunene River. Anyone desparately needing this species for their life list are best advised to go to Shakawe in Botswana where most of the lodge owners know of a pair in their vicinity. It is very large and distinctive and cannot be confused with any other owl.

Cape Eagle Owl - Kapuhu - *Bubo capensis*

This species is regarded as rare in Namibia but is probably underrecorded due to confusion with Spotted Eagle Owl. It has been recorded at a few widely separated sites in the drier western parts of the country (Fish River, Luderitz, Swakop River Valley, Brandberg). It is best separated from the Spotted Eagle Owl by its mottled (not barred) underparts and its orange (not yellow) eyes. They are most likely to occur in broken mountainous terrain or in rugged country surrounding river valleys.

Spotted Eagle Owl - Fleckenuhu - *Bubo africanus*

Our commonest large owl, the Spotted Eagle Owl, occurs throughout the country, not necessarily in wooded habitats. They often breed on the ground and are not bound by trees for nesting. Their populations vary considerably in Namibia, usually in response to outbreaks of rodents following good rains. They are common in towns in Namibia.

Giant Eagle Owl - Milchuhu - *Bubo lacteus*

This is our largest owl and is very distinctive with a pale face outlined in black and with conspicuous pink eyelids. They are often seen perching in large trees during the day, especially in Etosha and along the large, tree-lined rivers of the Kalahari. They are tremendous predators catching a variety of mammals, birds up to the size of a secretary bird, ducks and reptiles. They generally nest on the top of old nests of raptors, Social Weavers and Hamerkop. There has been a recent (September 1996) influx of Giant Eagle Owls in the Windhoek district and this may be in response to the lack of food in the surrounding areas because of the drought.

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