

Upper Bunyip Action Group Inc. - November 2002

Environmental Statement re The Sooty Owl and Powerful Owl - FFG-listed species that are subject to FFG-listed threatening processes that result from timber harvesting.

Transcript from Andrew *et al.* (1984) *Sites of Zoological Significance in the Westernport Region*, Dept of Conservation, Forests and Lands (Victoria) - (with bolding by UBAG).

Sooty Owl (*Tyto tenebricosa*) - from pp. 121-124 of Sect. 6.2 - "Species of Special Significance"

The Sooty Owl belongs to the barn owl group of owls (Genus: *Tyto*) which is characterized by a large heart-shaped facial disk. In colour, it is generally dark sooty or dusky grey, finely spotted with white. Compared with other *Tyto* species the Sooty Owl has very large eyes and a very short tail. (..) Sooty Owls are rarely seen and are generally regarded as uncommon. They are restricted in Australia to the south-east coast and adjacent slopes of the Great Dividing Range from the Conondale and Blackall Ranges in south-east Queensland to the Dandenong Ranges in southern Victoria (Schodde and Mason, 1980).

These owls are true rainforest birds, favouring galleries and pockets of tall wet gully forests along creeks, particularly those overtopped by great eucalypts with a substorey of rainforest trees and tree ferns. Sooty Owls are territorial and relatively sedentary. The territory occupied by a pair or a single bird can cover 200 - 800 hectares and this is actively defended with territorial calling and threat displays, predominantly at the approach of the breeding season.

(..)

By day, Sooty Owls roost in sheltered enclosures high in deep hollows in large eucalypts and in the "pipes" and "chimneys" in the trunks of trees. Occasionally shaded branches are used, particularly those close to the forest floor within dense gully rainforest. (..) Small to moderate sized arboreal and terrestrial mammals such as the Common ringtail possum, Sugar glider, and occasionally Yellow-bellied and Greater gliders and ground dwelling bandicoots, rats and marsupial mice are its main prey. (..) The Sooty Owl is adept at hunting within the confines of closed forest, picking prey from branches of trees, shrubs and forest floor.

(..)

The Sooty Owl is one of the least known of the Australian owls. Within Victoria comparatively few records are known and this species is generally regarded as rare (Frankenburg, 1971). In the northern forested section of the Westernport catchment, the Sooty Owl has recently been recorded from several localities, particularly in the Gembrook State Forest (E. McNabb and R. Loyn, pers.comm.) and the Tarago-Latrobe forest. **One record provided by this survey from a relatively isolated bushland block on Bourke Creek (R.J. Chambers Flora and Fauna Reserve) in Upper Beaconsfield is the south western limit of this species' known range. These sightings have significantly increased the number of records of Sooty Owls in Victoria.**

The Sooty Owl's dependence on large hollows for nest sites and preference for arboreal mammals which also require hollows, as its chief prey, makes this species especially vulnerable to clear-fell logging operations (Loyn, 1980). The retention of mature gully vegetation and other areas of old mature forest is essential for the conservation of the Sooty Owl.

Powerful Owl (*Ninox strenua*) - from pp. 124-126 of Sect. 6.2 - “Species of Special Significance”

The Powerful Owl is the largest of the Australian owls with a wingspan of up to 135 cm. Their shy and unobtrusive behaviour and cryptic patterning of brown and white barring on the back and characteristic brown chevron-shaped markings on the light under-belly, makes them difficult to detect as they roost by day in dense cover or high in the crown of a eucalypt (Slater, 1972).

Endemic to Australia, Powerful Owls are restricted to the tall open forests of the coastal south east and adjacent Great Dividing Range, extending south from near Rockhampton in south eastern Queensland along the east coast to Portland in south west Victoria.

This owl's optimum habitat is tall dense eucalypt forest on hills and mountains up to 1200 metres interspersed with rainforest gullies. Roosts of Powerful Owls are often found in gullies but they rarely hunt there. Unlike the Sooty Owl they are less adept at hunting within the confines of a closed forest. Their preferred prey are moderately large and slow moving arboreal mammals especially the Greater glider, or where these are not available, the Common ringtail possum. Both these possums commonly feed in the outer branches making them easy prey, while the faster and more agile Sugar glider and Yellow-bellied glider are only taken when the former are scarce.

(...)

Powerful Owls live in pairs and are sedentary and strongly territorial. Territories range upwards from 800 hectares (Seebeck, 1976a). Fleay (1968) considered that a breeding pair needed at least 1000 hectares of prime forest, to produce the 250 - 300 possums required per year. Established pairs probably occur in the same territory for life and are rarely found within 4-5 km and more often 10-20 km of other pairs.

(...)

Like the Sooty Owl, the Powerful Owl's need for large hollows for nesting and dependence on hollow-dwelling possums as its chief prey (Loyn, 1980) means it is adversely affected by the removal of mature trees, particularly through clear felling practices. Large areas of suitable forest are needed to support a breeding pair of Powerful Owls and like most hollow dwelling animals it is threatened by intensive forestry harvesting practice. It is essential that at least mature gully vegetation be preserved and a larger amount of mature trees are retained in logged areas. The Powerful Owl is restricted to the forested northern section of the Westernport catchment. Currently all suitable habitat of the Powerful Owl in the Westernport catchment is open to logging or clearing.

[UBAG's Comments - Is any plainer statement of supporting zoological evidence needed to justify an immediate cessation of logging in the 350 Upper Bunyip forestry block? *Tyto tenebricosa* (Sooty Owl) and *Ninox strenua* (Powerful Owl) are currently listed as threatened taxa under Schedule 2 of the Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 (as amended at 29 June 2000).

It should be borne in mind by the reader that **the above extract is from a 1984 report by scientists of the Dept of CFL, the forerunner of the current Dept of NRE!** Details of the references cited therefrom can be supplied if required.

Similar material in this report relates to the 1984 status of the Leadbeater's possum (*Gymnobelideus leadbeateri*) and all of this evidence supports our contention that the 350 Block must be closed to logging immediately.

The Blue Range - Mt Beenak area (including the 350 Block) is identified in this 1984 report as a Site of National Significance. A large proportion of the upper reaches of the Bunyip River was recommended by the Land Conservation Council in 1977 to be part of a hardwood production zone, and the UBAG can point to the deploring consequences of this decision. There are no prizes for guessing why this LCC decision fell this way!]