

facial disc, which could possibly be described as being composed of hair rather than feathers, is a deep chestnut-brown, fringed by a narrow line of light chestnut, around which is a wider margin of small stiff black feathers. There is a dark circle around the deep-set brownish-black eye which has a dark blue pupil. The tibia and tarsus are well covered with light chestnut-brown feathers right down to the brownish-grey feet. In all it is a very handsome bird, solidly built and powerful in appearance.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

It was necessary to spend long hours, sometimes whole nights, at the nest with the camera and flashlight before even a few exposures could be made. The birds were remarkably adept at taking advantage of the weather conditions, light and natural cover to avoid the attentions of the photographer. By the end of the 1954-5 season I think the birds knew more about my habits than I did about theirs!

### Size and Colour Discrepancy in Tasmanian Masked Owls

By J. R. SKEMP, Myrtle Bank, Tasmania

In November 1954, I visited 'Billop', the estate of Mr. Lambert Lawrence, at the foot of the Western Tiers, near Cressy, Tasmania. Mrs. Lawrence drew my attention to two owls roosting in a shrubbery of laurels and pittosporums in the old garden around the house. This was about midday. The first one she indicated had every appearance of being a Delicate or Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*). It was about 12 to 14 inches long, with a short tail; the under side was near white, flecked with a few small black spots; the upper side was light fawn mottled with brown and flecked with small white spots; the facial disc was white with a narrow brown border. Perched a few feet above it was another owl which looked to be a typical Tasmanian Masked Owl (*Tyto castanops*). It was about half as long again as the first owl, probably 18 inches from head to tip of tail, with a more than proportionately longer tail; the under side was fawn mottled brown, the upper side brown mottled dark brown; the facial disc was light chestnut with a dark brown or near black border.

A few weeks later I visited 'Billop' again with Mr. H. J. King, who wished to take colour photographs of the birds. We found them in a tall ivy-covered tree in front of the house, but in an impossible place for colour photography. On being disturbed the larger bird took refuge in a tall hawthorn tree nearby but inaccessible for photography, though it could be well observed through field glasses. The smaller bird alighted in the lower branches of an oak where Mr. King took several photographs of it.

Mrs. Lawrence assures me that these two owls have been living in the trees around the house for the past five or six years. Sometimes during the day they may be seen sitting side by side close together on a limb. At night they emit what she describes as a very harsh and deep 'h-a-a-a'. No other owls have been seen with them, and the nesting place, if any, is unknown. The nest and eggs of the Tasmanian Masked Owl are not recorded in any bird reference book. However, about two years ago, two bird photographers of Devonport found and photographed a nest and nestling in north-western Tasmania.

Sometimes, when disturbed from their day-time hiding places in the trees, the owls are attacked by other birds, principally Grey Butcher-birds and Magpies. Mr. Lawrence had recently rescued the smaller owl from two Ravens, each of which had hold of a wing of the owl and were apparently having a tug-of-war with it.

With owls, as with the diurnal birds of prey, the female is always bigger than the male, but the difference both in size and colour of this pair seems to me extraordinary.

I made inquiries at the Launceston Museum but the only specimen they had (which had lost its registered number and so was untraceable) appeared to be a Barn Owl.

I later visited the National Museum, Melbourne, where I was shown their collection of about six skins of the Tasmanian Masked Owl (though one was marked *Tyto novæ-hollandiæ*). Three of these, marked female, measured 17 to 18 inches from crown to tip of tail. In each case the under side was fawn mottled brown and the upper side dark brown mottled fawn. One specimen was lighter than the others and the facial disc of this one was near white with brown markings around the eyes: in the others the facial disc was light chestnut lighter than some live owls I have seen in Tasmania).

The only skin marked male measured 13 inches from crown to tail tip, the under side was near white flecked with brown, the upper side brown, mottled fawn, and flecked with white spots; the facial disc was near white with light brown border. It was only slightly bigger and slightly darker coloured than Victorian Barn Owls in the collection. I measured at random one Barn Owl marked ♂ and one marked ♀: the length in both cases was 12 inches and the colour identical (under side white flecked black or dark brown, upper side fawn-grey with black and white flecks, facial disc white with narrow fawn border to mark).

It is only in the last few years that *Tyto alba* has been added to the list of Tasmanian birds. Is it possible that some of the 'Barn Owls' recorded for Tasmania are small and very light coloured Masked Owls? I have been told that recently a specimen sent to the Hobart Museum was first identified as *T. alba* but later classified as *T. castanops*!