

TAXON SUMMARY

Rufous Owl (eastern)

1	Family	Strigidae
2	Scientific name	<i>Ninox rufa queenslandica</i> Mathews, 1911
3	Common name	Rufous Owl (eastern)
4	Conservation status	Near Threatened: d

5 Reasons for listing

This subspecies probably has a small population (Near Threatened: d), but is in no imminent danger.

	Estimate	Reliability
Extent of occurrence	60,000 km ²	medium
trend	stable	high
Area of occupancy	12,000 km ²	low
trend	stable	medium
No. of breeding birds	3,000	low
trend	stable	medium
No. of sub-populations	1	medium
Generation time	10 years	low

6 Intraspecific taxa

N. r. meesi (Cape York Peninsula) is also Near Threatened. *N. r. rufa* (north-western Australia) is Least Concern. Extralimital subspecies are *N. r. humeralis* (New Guinea) and *N. r. aruensis* (Aru Is). Global status of species is Least Concern.

7 Past range and abundance

North-eastern Queensland, from Cooktown to Rockhampton and inland to Mareeba and Blackdown Tableland (Schodde and Mason, 1982, Pavey, 1993, Higgins, 1999). Most records are from the coastal lowlands, but found up to at least 1,200 m elevation (Schodde and Mason, 1997, Kanowski, 1998).

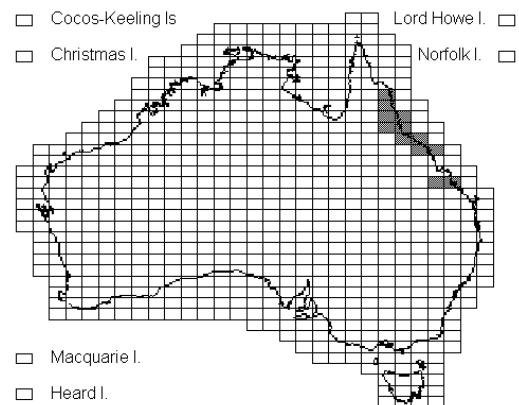
8 Present range and abundance

As above, including within the cities of Cairns and Townsville. In suitable habitat, nests are 3-4 km apart, with foraging ranges estimated at 400-800 ha (Schodde and Mason, 1980). Thus total breeding population was estimated at about 1,000 pairs (J. Young in Garnett, 1992). However, as a result of surveys undertaken on the Atherton uplands, Kanowski (1998) suggested that Rufous Owls may be more common.

9 Ecology

The eastern subspecies of Rufous Owl has most frequently been reported roosting and nesting in gallery rainforest and paperbark *Melaleuca* thickets along creeks, rainforest and mangrove edges and vine thickets (Schodde and Mason, 1980, Hollands, 1991, Nielsen, 1995, Higgins, 1999). However, on the Atherton Tableland at least, Rufous Owls are as common within rainforest as they are along its margins

(Kanowski, 1998). The bird lays 2 eggs in a large hollow, usually in a eucalypt or paperbark *Melaleuca*. The same nest may be used repeatedly for many years (Schodde and Mason, 1980, Higgins, 1999). Within rainforest, abundance of suitably-sized arboreal mammals appears to dictate distribution, although most reports of food are of animals found outside rainforest in surrounding woodland or wetlands (Kanowski, 1998). Common Brushtail Possum *Trichosurus vulpecula*, Common Ringtail Possum *Pseudocheirus peregrinus* and Sugar Glider *Petaurus breviceps* have been recorded in the Rufous Owl's diet on the Atherton Tablelands (Harrington and Debus, 2000). Elsewhere, medium to large birds, such as herons, waterfowl and Australian Brush-turkeys *Alectura lathami*, Pacific Baza *Aviceda subcristata*, and Spectacled Flying Fox *Pteropus conspicillatus* are taken, as well as numerous large insects (Schodde and Mason, 1980, Nielsen, 1995, Higgins, 1999).



10 Threats

Clearance of habitat for agriculture has resulted in a loss of about 85% of lowland vegetation in the wet tropics (Garnett *et al.*, 1999), and continues, particularly along the western edge of the subspecies' range, where sugarcane farming is expanding. However, Rufous Owls have persisted in uncleared riparian vegetation and other forest fragments, as well as in extensive tracts of rainforest in National Parks and State Forests. Localised threats include loss of nest trees to hot, late dry season fires, which burn the fringes of gallery rainforest and paperbark thickets (J. Young). Poisoning with rat baits may also be a localised problem (Young and De Lai, 1997), but remains unproven (P. Olsen).

11 Recommended actions

- 11.1 Protect riparian habitat within areas set aside for clearing, with buffers of at least 500 m around known nest sites.
- 11.2 Encourage non-toxic control of agricultural pests such as rodents, particularly the planting of trees along the edges of sugar cane and the erection of owl nest boxes.
- 11.3 Manage fire at known nest sites that might be vulnerable to hot fires.

12 Bibliography

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