

THE ELUSIVE TAWNY FROGMOUTH

By Karen McCasker



The Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*) is often mistaken for an owl, but is in fact a member of the Nightjar family. The Tawny Frogmouth is one of 3 members of the Frogmouth family, all of which are exclusive to Australia. The Tawny Frogmouth can be found in parts of mainland Australia and also the island of Tasmania. Tawny Frogmouths prefer open woodland areas which are comprised mainly of eucalypt trees. The Tawny is not found in desert areas (central Australia), nor in thick rainforest areas.

The Tawny Frogmouth ranges in size from 35 – 50cm in length with the larger birds being found in the southern areas of Australia. The Tawny has a wide mouth like a frog and has a large, horny, triangular hooked bill. The

plumage is silver-grey; slightly paler yellow; streaked and mottled with black and rufous colouring. A second plumage phase also occurs with birds being russet-red. The eye is yellow in both forms and the wide, heavy bill is olive-grey to black.

The Tawny Frogmouth is nocturnal, which means they are active at night and rest during the daylight hours. The Tawny is a master of camouflage which makes it almost impossible to find. The Tawny roosts during the day in a favourite tree, near the trunk and often sits very still, with the eyes reduced to slits and it is often mistaken for a dead branch on the tree in which it is roosting.



Tawny Frogmouths have a main diet of insects, worms, snails, beetles and slugs. When insects are not in abundance, they will also eat frogs, lizards and mice. Most food is obtained by dropping to the ground from an elevated perch, such as a tree branch. At other times, moths and insects are caught in flight. There have been incidents of Tawny Frogmouths being injured and/or killed by motor vehicles when chasing insects illuminated by vehicle headlights at night.

Tawny Frogmouths breed between August and December in most areas, although birds in more arid areas are known to breed in response to heavy rainfall. A flimsy nest is built in the fork of a tree, consisting of a loose platform of sticks, and the same nest is used year after year. The hen lays 2 or 3 eggs, with the male incubating during the day and both parents sharing incubation duties at night. Only one brood is raised each season in the northern areas and two broods are common in the southern areas. The eggs are incubated for a period of 30 days and babies hatch covered in white down. The babies stay in the nest until they are able to fly and then join the parents until independent.

Tawny Frogmouths are listed as common and their future in the wild is secure at present.

Some similarities between Owls and Frogmouths:

- Both are nocturnal
- Both eat insects
- Both have large eyes
- Both have soft feathers for silent flight
- Both have bristles or whiskers around their bills

Some differences between Owls and Frogmouths:

- Owls eat birds and animals up to their own size and sometimes larger, while Frogmouths are almost exclusively insectivorous
- Owl eyes face fully forward, while Frogmouths eyes face to the side
- Owls have large, powerful feet, while Frogmouths have small, weak feet
- Owls have a full or partial facial disk, while Frogmouths do not
- Owls have large asymmetrical ears, while Frogmouths do not
- Owls have twelve tail feathers, while Frogmouths have ten ■

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