

# Ornithological Observations



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Ornithological Observations accepts papers containing faunistic information about birds. This includes descriptions of distribution, behaviour, breeding, foraging, food, movement, measurements, habitat and plumage. It will also consider for publication a variety of other interesting or relevant ornithological material: reports of projects and conferences, annotated checklists for a site or region, specialist bibliographies, and any other interesting or relevant material.

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## VARIATIONS ON THE CALL OF THE PEL'S FISHING OWL *SCOTOPELIA PELI*

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## VARIATIONS ON THE CALL OF THE PEL'S FISHING OWL OWL *SCOTOPELIA PELI*

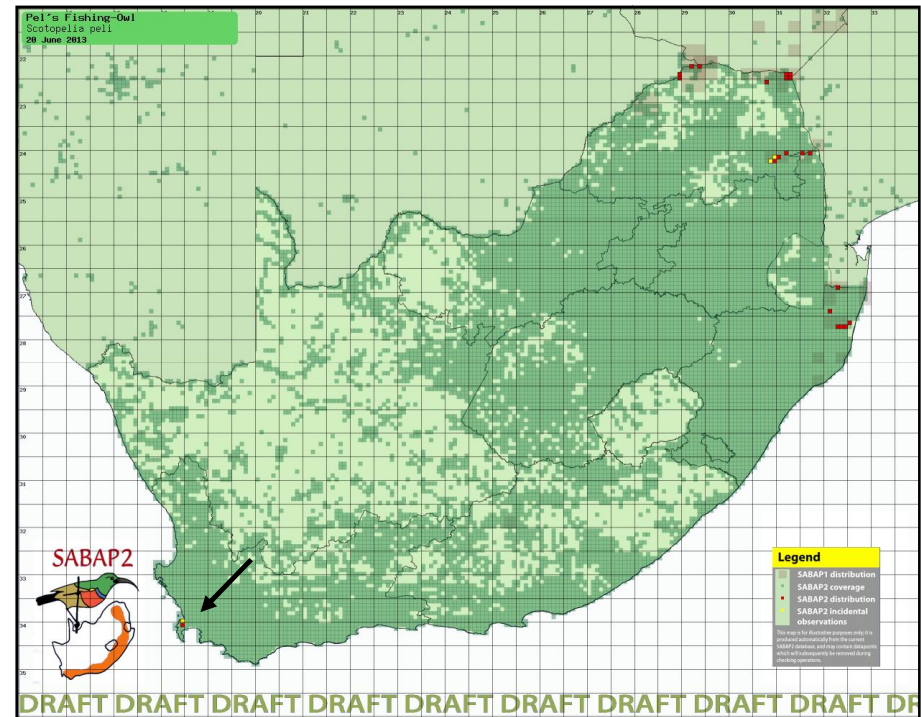
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The Pel's Fishing Owl *Scotopelia peli* is the only very large rufous owl in southern Africa – the part of the continent south of the Zambezi, Okavango and Kunene rivers. It is the largest of the African Fishing Owls. This species has a characteristic shaggy headed appearance with a poorly developed facial mask that lacks a black border. It is tawny rufous above barred with black. The underparts are tawny buff with black/brown streaking and spotting together with some abdominal barring. It has unfeathered white legs (often hidden by the belly feathers when perching). Eyes are brown and these birds lack ear tufts – so characteristic in many owl species. Its bill is black with a pale base. The female is paler (less rufous) than the male. Exceptionally heavy marking is present in some individuals – others may have albino or melanistic feathers. Female birds are larger than the males (Steyn 1984, Kemp 2005, pers. obs.)

These owls favour riverine forest especially along lowland rivers. The owl is also associated with pans and swamps. It occurs in suitable habitat south of the Sahara. It is locally common in the Okavango Delta especially in the Pan Handle region and in the adjacent Linyanti swamps in the Caprivi, Namibia. It resides along the Zambezi, Chobe and Okavango rivers in Botswana, the Caprivi and Zimbabwe. It also occurs along the large rivers of eastern Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Mpumalanga and northern KwaZulu-Natal (Kemp 2005).



**Fig 1** – Distribution of Pel's Fishing Owl in South Africa – note the record in Newlands, Cape Town indicated by the arrow. (Source: [sabap2.adu.org.za](http://sabap2.adu.org.za))

In the north-eastern and eastern parts of South Africa it occurs along the Luvuvhu and Pongola rivers in significant numbers. Recent annual surveys along Lowveld rivers such as the Sabie and the Olifants rivers have shown a concerning reduction in numbers (A Botha, EWT pers. comm.). It still occurs in KwaZulu-Natal along the Mkuze and Msunduzi rivers where large fig trees *Ficus sycomorus* form ideal habitat. Historically it may have occurred as far south as the Eastern Cape (Kemp 2005). A recent sighting of an adult Pel's Fishing Owl in Newlands, Cape Town (14.10.2012) adds to the enigma of this illusive bird (Hardaker, 2012)



**Fig 2** – The "Newlands Pel's" photographed in a suburban garden on 14 October 2012 (© Trevor Hardaker)

Population data available for Botswana gives 23 pairs along a 60 km stretch of river (Kemp 2005). Here the average density was one pair per km and in the densest parts; the closest nests were only 250-300 m apart. On the Luvuvhu River in South Africa, the average distance between pairs was 2-2.5 km in the 1990s, increasing to 3-3.5 km in 2007. The only data for KwaZulu-Natal is three pairs along a 4.8 km stretch of river (Usutu Fig Forest, Ndumu Game Reserve) (Kemp 2005). At certain times during drought, large congregations of fishing owls at remaining pools have been described as wailing for much of the day from hunger and emerging early in the afternoon in their desire to feed (Kemp 2005).

This article refers to personal observations made in the Fig Tree Forest in the Mkuze Game Reserve in January 1992

At sunset, birds roosting in large shady trees some distance from the Mkuze River started grunting "hoom-hoom-hoom". This call is similar to that of the Ground Hornbill *Bucorvus leadbeateri*. The hidden birds gave these grunts over a number of minutes and the birds continued to grunt as they made their way through the riverine forest to their hunting perches. The grunting was not continuous and a grunt series was separated by long periods of silence. The birds responsible for the calling remained well hidden during this period so no information concerning technique of calling, age of birds or sex of birds could be inferred. Once the hunting perches were reached (usually large branches hang over pools or still sections of the river) and the sun had set completely, the call changed from grunting to an eerie wailing "wheooooou". This call was given repeatedly by at least seven different birds (all calling at short time intervals from various locations along the Mkuze River and the Nsumo Pan). At this stage, one of the birds (an adult owl) was clearly observed (pers. obs.). In January 1992 KwaZulu-Natal (and most of southern Africa) was in



the grips of a severe drought and the Mkuze River was reduced to large pools with considerable stretches of dry river between pools. The above-mentioned birds occupied a 3 km stretch of the Mkuze River with two large pools (occupied by five birds) and the eastern side of Nsumo Pan (occupied by two birds) (pers. obs.).

Various authorities have described the call. According to the description in *Birds of Africa* (Fry *et al.* 1988), the male gives a sonorous hoot that is sometimes preceded but usually *followed* by a deep, softer grunt "hoooommmm-hut!", audible up to 3 km and uttered with throat and upper breast greatly inflated. The female sometimes replies with a higher softer "hoot" followed by shorter, second double note "hoot-oot". A series of grunts may precede hooting which follows at about 10 second intervals for periods of 3-4 minutes. The owls call on most nights, especially on moonlit nights before the breeding season. The call may be heard up to 3 km away (Kemp and Calburn 1987). Either sex may utter a penetrating trill while feigning injury (Steyn 1982). Large young and the female while soliciting food make a strangled wailing cry "wheooooou". Steyn (1984) describes this call by the begging young as "a cry of a lost soul falling into a bottomless pit". A high pitched trill with open bill accompanied by a screaming sound may be given as a distraction display and to call the mate off the nest (Kemp 2005). Carlyon (2011) recently described loud, gruff hooting together with an open billed loud distressed sounding chittering as part of a distraction display. In addition, various hoots and grunts prior and after the duet have also been described. The voice of the female is generally deeper than that of the male.

Breeding occurs from October to June with a peak in the months February through April. Post fledging dependence is about nine months (Kemp 2005). The well described grunting call of the adult

Pel's Fishing Owl was not heard during these observations. However, the grunting call preceding the bird reaching their fishing perches and the wailing call given by adult birds (one adult bird was actually seen calling) (pers. obs.) have not been previously described. Although Steyn (1984) has previously described grunting, it either preceded or followed the duet and no dueting occurred during this description. It is unlikely that breeding success was good enough to explain all the calls as begging young or soliciting females. Famine was unlikely as a number of suitable fishing pools were available and not obviously occupied by owls.

The Owls remains entrenched in the lonely remote and unspoilt parts of Africa and it has hence remained an enigma for many years. This additional data on the call of the Pel's Fishing Owl I hope will help to shed new light and lift partially the shroud of mystery that surrounds this beautiful owl.

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#### Acknowledgements

Photo of the "Newlands Pel's" used with permission from Trevor Hardaker.

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