EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD
#8 THE LAUGHING OWL
Sceloglaux albifacies

LAUGHING OWL
By John G. Keulemans
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The Laughing Owl, also known as the White-faced Owl, was an endemic owl found in New Zealand; and was plentiful when European settlers arrived in 1840. Skins were sent to the British Museum, and a scientific description was published in 1845. The species belongs to a monotypic genus, *Sceloglaux.*

The call of the Laughing Owl has been described as "a loud cry made up of a series of dismal shrieks frequently repeated". The species was given its name because of this sound. Other descriptions of the call were: "A peculiar barking noise ... just like the barking of a young dog"; "Precisely the same as two men "cooeying" to each other from a distance"; "A melancholy hooting note", or a high-pitched chattering, only heard when the birds were on the wing and generally on dark and drizzly nights or immediately preceding rain. Various whistling, chuckling and mewing notes were observed from a captive bird.

The Laughing Owl generally occupied rocky, low rainfall areas. It was also found in forest districts on the North Island. Their diet was very varied, encompassing a wide range of prey, from beetles and Weta (family *Anostostomatidae*), up to birds and geckos of more than 250 grams, and later, when introduced, rats and mice.

♂ **WELLINGTON TREE WETA**
Hemideina crassidens
Some species of Weta
can grow to 20cm
Photo: Tony Wills

Laughing Owls were apparently ground feeders, chasing prey on foot in preference to hunting on the wing. Knowledge of their diet, and how that diet changed over time, is preserved in fossil and sub-fossil deposits of their pellets. Their diet generally reflected the communities of small animals in the area, such as small seabirds, New Zealand Snipe, Kakarikis and even large earthworms. Once Pacific Rats were introduced to New Zealand and began to reduce the number of native prey items the Laughing Owl was able to switch to eating them instead. They were still therefore relatively common when European settlers arrived. Being quite large, they were also able to deal with the introduced European rats that contributed to the extinction of their prey; however, when Stoats were introduced to control feral Rabbits, and Cats became feral they were too much for the species.

Breeding began in September or October. The nests were lined with dried grass and were on bare ground, in rocky ledges, fissures or under boulders. Two white, roundish eggs were laid, measuring 44-51mm x 38-43mm (1.7-2" x 1.5-1.7"). Incubation took 25 days, with the male feeding the female on the nest.

By about 1880, the species was becoming rare, and the last known specimen was found dead at Bluecliffs Station near Canterbury, New Zealand on the 5th of July, 1914. There have been some unconfirmed reports since then; the last of these for the North Island were in 1925 and 1927, at the Wairaumoana branch of Lake Waikaremoana. In his book *The Wandering Naturalist*, Brian Parkinson describes reports of a Laughing Owl in the Pakahi near Opotiki in the 1940s. Also an unidentified bird was reported to have been heard flying overhead and giving "a most unusual weird cry which might almost be described as maniacal" at Saddle Hill, Fiordland, in February 1956. There was also a report of Laughing Owl egg fragments being found in Canterbury in 1960.

STOATS AT PLAY
Mustela ermine

Extinction was caused by persecution, mainly for specimens; land use changes, and the introduction of predators such as Cats and Stoats. It was generally accepted until the late 20th century that the species' disappearance was due to competition by introduced predators for the Polynesian Rat (*Kiore*), a favourite prey of the Laughing Owl. However, this is unlikely as the *Kiore* is itself an introduced animal. The Laughing Owl originally preyed on small birds, reptiles and bats, and later would have probably fed on introduced mice as well. Human interference, and predation of this unwary and gentle-natured bird by introduced species, seems more likely to have caused its extinction.

Reference: *Wikipedia*