

Southern Boobook *Ninox novaeseelandiae* Feeding on the Fungus *Pislithus albus* in North Queensland

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Summary. This note describes an observation of a Southern Boobook *Ninox novaeseelandiae* pecking at the fruiting body of a terrestrial fungus in northern Queensland.

On 16 January 2005, at 0522 h near Yarramulla ranger base in Undara Volcanic National Park in northern Queensland (18°11'S, 144°39'E), we observed an adult Southern Boobook *Ninox novaeseelandiae* perched on an emergent firm, tennis-ball-sized sporocarp of the terrestrial fungus *Pislithus albus*. The owl pecked at the fungus several times before flying off in response to the disturbance of our vehicle. Upon inspection, it was clear that the owl had removed parts of the fungus (Plate 4). To our knowledge, this is the first record of such behaviour by this species. Boobooks are considered to be carnivorous, taking small birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles and invertebrates (Higgins 1999 and references therein; McNabb 2002; Penck & Queale 2002). However, these studies and records reviewed by Higgins (1999) were based on pellet and gut analyses, and observations of captures of live (mainly vertebrate) prey, in southern Australia. Non-animal material has not previously been recorded in the diet of the Boobook, and plant material in pellets of other *Ninox* owls has been presumed to be ingested accidentally with prey (Higgins 1999).



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7 cm

The fungus *Pislithus albus* showing peck marks made by Southern Boobook, northern Queensland, January 2005

We offer two possible explanations: that the owl was consuming the fungus, or that the owl was pecking at the fungus in an attempt to remove a prey item from within the sporocarp. Beetle larvae are known to occur inside the fruiting bodies of this fungus (Teresa Lebel pers. comm.). Our observation occurred early in the wet season, when prey items such as grasshoppers were abundant and widespread in the surrounding environment. Prey could therefore have been easily captured with less effort than pecking through a firm sporocarp.

More research is clearly required in order to gain an understanding of the importance of *P. albus*, or its contents, in the diet of Southern Boobooks. Without detailed microscopic analysis of pellets or gut contents, fungal spores may have been missed in previous dietary analyses. Spores may be more easily found in gut samples than in pellets, and would require higher magnification than available in the stereomicroscopes commonly used in owl dietary analyses.

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References

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