

Deletion of Laughing Owl *Sceloglaux albifacies* from Appendix II

Proponent: New Zealand

Summary: The Laughing Owl *Sceloglaux albifacies* was a tall owl (35-40 cm) with relatively long legs, endemic to New Zealand. It was the only species in the genus *Sceloglaux*. The last confirmed sighting of the species was 1889. Unconfirmed sightings persisted until the 1960s; however, over the past century exhaustive surveys have been undertaken throughout its historical range in known or suspected habitat, at appropriate times (night and day) throughout the year, all of which have failed to confirm the presence of the species. It is believed that the causes of its extinction were habitat loss through grazing or burning, predation by introduced mammals and hunting by humans. It is now accepted as Extinct by IUCN and BirdLife International.

The Laughing Owl was included in the CITES Appendices in 1979 as part of the listing of the whole Order Strigiformes, although it was almost certainly already extinct at that time. Since then there has been one record of trade in the CITES trade database, but these are now known to have been misreported White-faced Scops Owl *Ptilopsis leucotis*.

In the unlikely event of the species being rediscovered, it would be covered by New Zealand's Wildlife Act 1953 which would prevent the hunting, killing, taking, trapping, capturing, or trading of the species by any means.

Analysis: *Sceloglaux albifacies* is almost certainly extinct. The one record of trade in the CITES trade database is an error. It was distinctively different from the other three owl species found in New Zealand and it is unlikely that removal of the species would stimulate the trade of look-alike species under the name of this species. It therefore does not meet the criteria for inclusion in Appendix II. In the highly unlikely event of its re-discovery it would automatically become protected according to New Zealand's Wildlife Act 1953, preventing the hunting, killing, taking, trapping, capturing, or trading of the species by any means.

However, the Laughing Owl forms part of a generic listing of a higher taxon (the Order Strigiformes) in the Appendices. At the time the Order was listed, the species was almost certainly already extinct. Removing it would likely result in an annotation to the current listing for Strigiformes. It is not clear how this will simplify implementation of the Convention.

Supporting Statement (SS)	Additional information
New Zealand.	<u>Range</u>
Extinct.	<u>IUCN Global Category</u>
	<i>Classified as Extinct by IUCN in 1988.</i>

Supporting Statement (SS)	Additional information
Biological and trade criteria for retention in Appendix II (Res. Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP15) Annex 2 a)	
<u>A) Trade regulation needed to prevent future inclusion in Appendix I</u>	
<p>In the last 98 years exhaustive surveys have been undertaken throughout its historical range in known or suspected habitat, at appropriate times (night and day) throughout the year. Unfortunately, these surveys have failed to confirm the presence of the species, and so the species can be defined according to Annex 5 of <i>Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP15)</i>, as being 'possibly extinct'.</p> <p>The last accepted sight records were of birds seen at Waikohu near Gisborne in 1889, and near Porirua before 1892, but there were a few unaccepted records through to the 1930s.</p> <p>The species declined rapidly after about 1880, and the last known bird was found freshly dead at Blue Cliffs, South Canterbury in July 1914, but unverified records were reported through to the 1960s.</p> <p>If the species is ever found to be alive, it would not be affected by international trade because it would automatically become absolutely protected according to New Zealand's Wildlife Act 1953. This would prevent the hunting, killing, taking, trapping, capturing, or trading of the species by any means.</p>	<p><i>Sceloglaux albifacies</i> was endemic to New Zealand with the nominate race on the South and Stewart Islands (with bones known from the Chatham Islands) and the subspecies <i>rufifacies</i> on the North Island. Birds were not uncommon until the first half of the 19th century, but were becoming rare by the 1840s. The last specimens of <i>rufifacies</i> were collected in 1889, with unconfirmed reports until the 1930s, and of <i>albifacies</i>, in 1914, with unconfirmed reports until the 1960s (Williams and Harrison, 1972; Tennyson and Martinson, 2006; BirdLife International, 2012).</p> <p>Ghana reported the import of 50 live wild specimens from Togo that originated in New Zealand in 2010. Ghana has stated that this was in fact trade in specimens of White-faced Scops Owl <i>Ptilopsis leucotis</i> (Ghana Management Authority, in litt., 2012).</p>
Retention in Appendix II to improve control of other listed species	
<u>A) Specimens in trade resemble those of species listed in Appendix II under Res. Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP15) Annex 2 a or listed in Appendix I</u>	
<u>B) Compelling other reasons to ensure that effective control of trade in currently listed species is achieved</u>	
<p>The Laughing Owl belongs to the endemic, monospecific, genus <i>Sceloglaux</i>, and so has no close relatives. It was a moderately large (600 g) owl with yellowish-brown plumage heavily streaked brown, a white or rufous facial disk around dark reddish-brown eyes, and with disproportionately long legs for an owl. It is distinctively different from the other three owl species found in New Zealand. It is very much larger and paler than both the native <i>Ninox novaeseelandiae</i> and the introduced <i>Athene noctua</i>. Darker, streaked plumage and long legs distinguishes it from the smaller self-introduced <i>Tyto alba</i>. New Zealand is of the opinion that the removal of Laughing Owl from the CITES Appendices will not stimulate the illegal trade of look-alike species under the name of this species. It is well recognised in conservation and ornithological literature that this distinctive species is extinct, and if ever it is miraculously rediscovered, then this endemic species would automatically become absolutely protected in New Zealand under the Wildlife Act 1953. This would prevent the hunting, killing, taking, trapping, capturing, or trading of the species by any</p>	<p><i>Ninox novaeseelandiae</i>, <i>Tyto alba</i>, <i>Athene noctua</i> are all listed in CITES Appendix II.</p>

Supporting Statement (SS)	Additional information
means.	
Other information	
<u>Threats</u>	
<p>Primary threats to the species were habitat loss as open grassland was burned and converted to pastoral farmland. Laughing Owls were hunted by Maori, early European settlers, and by museum and curio collectors. Predation by introduced mammals, especially mustelids and possibly rats and cats, is considered the likely main cause of extinction.</p>	<p><i>Causes of the species extinction are obscure, possibly habitat modification through grazing or burning, or predation by introduced mammals (Williams and Harrison, 1972).</i></p>
<u>Conservation, management and legislation</u>	
<p>Although listed in 1979 in CITES Appendix II as part of the Order Strigiformes, the species was almost certainly extinct before it was listed. It is included in Annex B of the European Union's CITES Regulations.</p>	
<u>Other comments</u>	
<p>The species has been subject to the Periodic Review of the Animals Committee. At AC26 the Animals Committee recommended that <i>Sceloglaux albifacies</i> should be deleted from Appendix II (based on AC26 WG1 Doc 2) because it is extinct.</p>	

References:

- BirdLife International (2012). *Sceloglaux albifacies*. In: IUCN 2012. IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2012.1. <www.iucnredlist.org>. Downloaded on 09 October 2012
- Ghana Management Authority (2012). In litt. to the IUCN/ TRAFFIC Analyses Team, Cambridge, UK.
- Tennyson, A. J. D. and Martinson, P. (2006). *Extinct Birds of New Zealand*. Te Papa Press, Wellington.
- Williams, G. R. and Harrison, M. (1972). The Laughing Owl *Sceloglaux albifacies* (Grey, 1844), a general survey of a near-extinct species. *Notornis* 19: 4-19.