

CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES  
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA

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Sixteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties  
Bangkok (Thailand), 3-14 March 2013

CONSIDERATION OF PROPOSALS FOR AMENDMENT OF APPENDICES I AND II

A. Proposal

New Zealand proposes that *Sceloglaux albifacies* (laughing owl) be removed from Appendix II, in accordance with provisions of Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev CoP15) Annex 2a and Annex 2b. This endemic owl of New Zealand no longer merits listing in Appendix II because it is extinct. The last known laughing owl was found dead at Blue Cliffs, South Canterbury, in 1914. 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 Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP 15), as being 'possibly extinct'. Since 1988, the IUCN Red List has classified the species as being 'extinct'. 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. Accordingly, a de-listing is consistent with the precautionary measures of Annex 4 of Res. Conf. 9.24 (Rev. Cop15).

B. Proponent

New Zealand\*.

C. Supporting statement

1. Taxonomy

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|--------------------------|---|
| 1.1 Class:               | Aves  |
| 1.2 Order:               | Strigiformes  |
| 1.3 Family:              | Strigidae   |
| 1.4 Species:             | <i>Sceloglaux albifacies</i> (G.R.Gray 1844)  |
| 1.5 Scientific synonyms: | none  |
| 1.6 Common names:        | English: laughing owl<br>white-faced owl<br>French: chouette à joues blanches<br>ninox rieuse<br>Spanish: lechuzón cariblanco<br>nínox reidor |
| 1.7 Code numbers:        | A-220.002.022.001   |

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\* The geographical designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the CITES Secretariat or the United Nations Environment Programme concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The responsibility for the contents of the document rests exclusively with its author.

## 2. Overview

*Sceloglaux albigifacies* was endemic to New Zealand. It was listed in CITES Appendix II on 28 June 1979 as part of a large group of Strigiformes species.

The Periodic Review of the Appendices, as currently agreed by the Parties, is designed to review species already included in the Appendices to determine whether their listings continue to be appropriate, based on current biological and trade information, and using the provisions in Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP15) on Criteria for amendment of Appendices I and II. In compliance with Resolution Conf. 14.8 on *Periodic Review of the Appendices*, paragraphs b), c) and d), at the 25<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Animals Committee (Geneva, 2011) *Sceloglaux albigifacies* was one of 40 species chosen to be reviewed between CoP15 and CoP17 (2010 and 2016). At AC26 (Geneva, 2012) the Animals Committee recommended that *Sceloglaux albigifacies* should be deleted from Appendix II (based on AC26 WG1 Doc 2) because it is extinct.

## 3. Species characteristics

### 3.1 Distribution

Subfossil remains in caves, dunes and swamps, some midden remains, and historical records show that *Sceloglaux albigifacies rufifacies* was widely distributed in the North Island up until the 1800s. The last accepted sight records were of birds seen at Waikohu near Gisborne in 1889, and near Porirua before 1892 (Gill *et al.* 2010), but there were a few unaccepted records through to the 1930s (Williams & Harrison 1972).

Late Pleistocene and Holocene fossil bones and midden material of *S. a. albigifacies* was widespread in the South Island and on Stewart Island, and remained so until the mid-1800s, when they were regarded as fairly common and reported from Nelson through to Fiordland (Heather & Robertson 2005). They declined rapidly after about 1880, and the last known bird was found freshly dead at Blue Cliffs, South Canterbury in July 1914 (Fuller 2000, Tennyson & Martinson 2006, Gill *et al.* 2010), but unverified records were reported through to the 1960s (Williams & Harrison 1972).

### 3.2 Habitat

The species seemed to prefer forest and scrub edges and rocky places in open country, such as limestone cliffs and outcrops.

### 3.3 Biological characteristics

The breeding season was from August to January. Clutch was of 2 white eggs in a grass-lined nest deep in a rocky crevice (Oliver 1955, Fuller 2000, Heather & Robertson 2005). In pre-human times, they would have likely fed on lizards, large invertebrates and birds, but since human arrival in New Zealand, introduced rats and mice were also eaten (Heather & Robertson 2005).

### 3.4 Morphological characteristics

A typical owl, 35-40 cm tall, but with relatively long legs. Sexes alike, with yellowish-brown plumage heavily streaked brown in *S. a. albigifacies*, but with a rufous tinge in *S. a. rufifacies*. Face discs white around a dark eye. Much larger and paler than both *Ninox novaeseelandiae*, the common native owl in New Zealand, and the introduced *Athene noctua*. Darker, streaked plumage distinguishes it from self-introduced *Tyto alba*.

### 3.5 Role of the species in its ecosystem

This species would have likely had a role as a top predator of large invertebrates, lizards and small birds in pre-human New Zealand.

## 4. Status and trends

### 4.1 Habitat trends

Habitat was lost and altered through fires and subsequent development of pastoral farmland.

#### 4.2 Population size

Believed to be extinct since about 1914.

#### 4.3 Population structure

Formerly occurred in territorial pairs.

#### 4.4 Population trends

The species is believed to be extinct since 1914 following a steady decline in the North Island following human arrival in New Zealand about 1000 years ago, and rapid decline in the South Island after about 1880. The species has been regarded as extinct on the IUCN Red Lists since the first list was compiled in 1988 (see: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/106002315/0>). The number of museum specimens known are: 53 skins, 2 in spirits, 3 partial skeletons, 19 eggs, 1 nest, and fossil remains of about 100 individuals (Tennyson & Martinson 2006).

#### 4.5 Geographic trends

Decline in the more populated North Island preceded that in the South Island, suggesting a human influence in its extinction.

### 5. Threats

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 (Tennyson & Martinson 2006).

### 6. Utilization and trade

#### 6.1 National utilization

None

#### 6.2 Legal trade

None

#### 6.3 Parts and derivatives in trade

Not applicable

#### 6.4 Illegal trade

Not applicable

#### 6.5 Actual or potential trade impacts

Not applicable

### 7. Legal instruments

#### 7.1 National

If the species is rediscovered, it would automatically become absolutely protected under the Wildlife Act 1953. This would prevent the hunting, killing, taking, trapping, capturing, or trading of the species by any means.

#### 7.2 International

CITES Appendix II, and is included in Annex B of the European Union's CITES Regulations.

## 8. Species management

### 8.1 Management measures

Not applicable

### 8.2 Population monitoring

Various nationwide surveys, based on timed call counts at night, and distribution mapping by day and night (e.g. Bull *et al.* 1985, Robertson *et al.* 2007), have failed to locate any laughing owls. Their loud calls, described as a series of doleful shrieks, or like that of a yelping dog, would have drawn attention to their presence if they had remained extant.

### 8.3 Control measures

#### 8.3.1 International

CITES, EU Commission Regulations implementing CITES

#### 8.3.2 Domestic

In New Zealand, the species (although extinct) is absolutely protected under the Wildlife Act 1953.

### 8.4 Captive breeding and artificial propagation

Not applicable

### 8.5 Habitat conservation

Not applicable

### 8.6 Safeguards

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 means.

## 9. Information on similar species

The laughing owl belongs to the endemic, monospecific, genus *Sceloglaux*, 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 other three owl species found in New Zealand. It is very much larger and paler than both the native *Ninox novaeseelandiae* and the introduced *Athene noctua*. Darker, streaked plumage and long legs distinguishes it from the smaller self-introduced *Tyto alba*.

## 10. Consultations

This species was recommended for delisting from Appendix II of CITES by the Animals Committee at AC 26 (Geneva, 2012). The Ornithological Society of New Zealand and the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand, BirdLife International's partner in New Zealand, support this proposal.

## 11. Additional remarks

Although listed in 1979 on CITES Appendices as part of the Order Strigiformes, the species was almost certainly extinct before it was listed. At AC 26 (Geneva, 2012) the Animals Committee recommended that the species be removed from the CITES Appendices because it is well recognised as being extinct. New Zealand is happy to comply with that recommendation and does not consider that the removal of the

species from the CITES Appendices will add any significant confusion or complications to the listings of Strigiformes shown in the Appendices, any more than if an owl species was shifted from Appendix II to Appendix I. New Zealand is of the opinion that the removal of extinct species from the Appendices is desirable, and the removal of laughing owl 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.

## 12. References

- BirdLife International (2012) Species factsheet: *Sceloglaux albifacies*. Downloaded from <http://www.birdlife.org> on 14 August 2012.
- Bull, P.C.; Gaze, P.D.; Robertson, C.J.R. 1985. *The Atlas of Bird Distribution in New Zealand*. Ornithological Society of New Zealand, Wellington.
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