

## PROTECTION OF TASMANIAN OWLS. \*

BY COL. W. V. LEGGE, R.A.

I desire to bring to the notice of the Fellows of the Royal Society to-night the advisability of protecting the owls of Tasmania, inasmuch as they are the most useful vermin-killers of any known family of birds, while at the same time no birds are more persecuted by well-meaning people through ignorance of their true mode of life and also by pot-hunters in search of so-called sport. It is thought by the majority of people that owls destroy birds to a great extent, whereas, in reality, there are few species of this large family which are partial to birds. Owls are either twilight or night feeders, at which time vermin or other small animals are chiefly about, and, therefore, in the economy of nature, they form the natural food of these birds.

Any of us who have studied works on British ornithology are, perhaps familiar with the story of the farmer who, missing his pigeons from his dovecote night after night, laid in wait with his gun, knowing that a pair of barn owls inhabited his premises, and shooting at the supposed offender, whom he caught issuing from the pigeon-house, brought him down with a huge rat in his talons.

The large owls which kill birds in any quantity, such as the genera *Bubo*, *Surnia*, *Nyctea*, and others are absent from Australia and Tasmania, and in fact the only species in this quarter of the globe which feeds much on birds is the large hawk owl, *Ninox Strenua*, Gould, of Eastern and Northern Australia. We have only three species in this island: the well-known chesnut-faced owl, *Strix Castanops*, Gould, belonging to the "Barn Owl" section, and strictly a vermin-killing species, and the two little hawk-owls, *Ninox Boobook* and *Ninox Maculata*, which are chiefly insect-feeding species. In Victoria all owls are strictly protected, and in South Australia and New South Wales I believe they are partly so. I would therefore suggest that a deputation from the Royal Society wait on the Premier and request him to take steps at the forthcoming session of Parliament to have our owls protected, shooting them being forbidden, except for scientific purposes, when specimens may be required to assist naturalists in any research they may be engaged in.

I may add that my friend, Dr. Agnew, is very anxious to see this step taken, and though I myself have long wished to see our owls protected, it is mainly at the Doctor's suggestion that I put the matter before the Society.

\*I was not aware, when I read this Paper, that the owls were protected by Act of Parliament, passed in 1887.—W.V.L.