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Duetting and duelling

Different claims about the purpose of owl calling led to different interpretations of owl behaviour. The claim that mated male and female Boobooks ‘duetted’, sang together in a coordinated fashion was interesting and testable.

One can start with a simple question – ‘Do Boobooks duet?’ and then break this down into smaller questions:

- 1) How do ornithologists define duetting? (the first step in testing a claim)
- 2) How do we find evidence in the field showing duetting?, and
- 3) How valid is this previous evidence?

Definition

Marks *et al.* (1999) said about duetting Spotted Eagle Owls that mated males and females sounded like one owl calling. The two owls’ calls blend into one, as happens with Australian Magpies or other butcherbirds. In her definition of duetting, Farabaugh (1982) first defined the term *bout*, crucial to her definition of duetting. She said: ‘Vocalisations, like other behaviours, are clumped rather than randomly distributed in time. These clumps are called *bouts*’ (p. 87).

She defined *duetting* as when ‘bouts of certain elements in the repertoire of one bird frequently overlap with bouts of certain elements in the repertoire of its mate ... Further, there is some organisation of both participants’ elements within the region of overlap. This view can be expressed in terms of three variables that can be measured for any species: one measure of *bout overlap*, i.e. the percentage of