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Pre-breeding behaviour

As mentioned above, the reproductive period of owls is prolonged compared with that of many birds. Even the Southern Boobook, our smallest owl, takes at least five months to complete a breeding effort. Most owls establish nesting territories large enough for breeding and for both the male and female to hunt in. Site fidelity is high in *Ninox* owls. One or both members of the pair often remain year-round on the territory, or return to the same home range each year. Owls such as Barking Owls and Powerful Owls are said to form monogamous, lifelong bonds but this seems unlikely and needs confirmation. Long-term study is necessary. Pairs can remain bonded for many years, or until one dies, but studies of territories over many years, even decades, probably will show that some individuals switch territories and mates. More likely, females change territories more often than males, and home range sizes change over time (Olsen and Trost 2007).

During winter, the male Southern Boobooks we studied remained on their breeding territories, but females often travelled 7 to 10 km away and spent the winter on a separate home range, or sometimes wintered in the far corner of their old breeding territory. We will discuss 'female desertion' in more detail in Chapter 30. During winter, females often returned to the breeding territory and to last year's male for a night or two, and roosted with him. Returning females mutual preened with their mates and used low croaking calls in greeting, then returned to their winter home range. The female in Table 24.1 returned on 14 September and stayed for the rest of the breeding season.

Boobooks use territorial calling through much of the year, but nights of calling are less frequent during winter, then they abruptly increase during spring