

# 27

## Pair behaviour – incubation

As mentioned in Chapter 24 the breeding period of owls is prolonged compared to other birds. Even the Southern Boobook, our smallest owl, takes at least five months to complete a breeding cycle, about the same amount of time as a Peregrine Falcon. Southern Boobooks have incubation periods around 30 days, nestling periods around 42 days, and post-fledging periods around 30 to 60 days, similar to a Peregrine.

Most owl eggs are white, not coloured as falcon, eagle or hawk eggs are, probably because owl eggs are covered during the day by the incubating female and the eggs are often concealed in tree hollows or deep grass. Owl eggs do not need to be camouflaged and white may help to make them visible in hollows. Compared to other birds' eggs, owls eggs are comparatively round, a shape that occupies less space for their volume than do other configurations, as one would expect for hollow-nesting species. Owls nesting on flat areas, such as Snowy Owls or Short-eared Owls, lay more oval-shaped eggs (Johnsgard 2002). *Tyto* owls are said to begin incubation from the first egg and be less seasonal than *Ninox* owls that begin incubation with the second egg, if there is one. Consequently, nestling *Tyto* owls (such as Barn Owls) within a brood may be of several ages, but nestling *Ninox* owls in a brood will be closer to the same age.

In the days before egg-laying, females sit fluffed-up and looking ill. This is called 'egg-laying lethargy' (see Figure 27.1). This period of inactivity allows eggs to form and this appearance of 'lethargy' stops after eggs are laid.

The clutch size in Australian owls varies with each species, but the difference is not closely linked with the body mass of the owl (Table 27.1). The four