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Fledgling behaviour

Fledging behaviour is poorly understood in Australian owls. The period between a juvenile's first flight from the nest and its dispersal from the breeding territory has received little attention. It is a crucial period for young owls because they need to practise hunting. If juveniles fail to acquire hunting skills during this period, they may starve, even in the face of abundant food. Most do acquire hunting skills, but they need to acquire them before winter cold and food shortage make life harder, at least in south-eastern Australia.

The values for fledging to independence given for Australian owls in Higgins (1999) are given in Table 31.1.

The most obvious behaviour in fledged owlets is food-begging. Most species use whizzing, churring, rasping, or hissing calls. Boobooks use a cricket-like Trill call and they do this persistently through the night. The Trill call is also a Contact call, allowing the young owls to find each other in the night and stay together. Young *Ninox* follow adults through the forest, or stay put and wait for adults to deliver food. During the day they may roost back inside the nest hollow, in a different hollow, or with all or part of the family in a eucalypt, exotic or Native Cherry tree.

Occasionally, fledgling Boobooks crossed territorial borders and begged from neighbouring adults. In these instances during the first 10 years of the study, the neighbouring parents ignored the intruding juveniles and pulled back their faces if food-begging juveniles perched close and touched beaks with them. Adults flew away if the neighbouring young persisted, and we did not see parents cross borders to retrieve strayed fledglings. The young seemed to treat all parents, even