

# 41

## Wallacea

For over a decade the island of Sumba in Wallacea hid a mystery. Only a few ornithologists had glimpsed the ‘mystery owl’, and they disagreed about it. Some claimed it was a hawk-owl in the genus *Ninox* like the Southern Boobook; some claimed it was a Scops owl in the genus *Otus*, like the Common Scops Owl in Europe.

Looking at a map of eastern Indonesia (Figure 41.1), it is not clear why qualified ornithologists believed a mystery owl on Sumba was closely related to owls in far away Europe or Asia, not to owls in Australia. Australia is closer to these islands than it is to New Zealand, Fiji, New Caledonia or Solomon Islands. However, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, New Caledonia and Solomon Islands are part of the *Australasian avifaunal region* where mainly Australasian birds evolved and live. In contrast, Bali and Java lie in the *Oriental avifauna region* close to Sumba. The chain of islands stretching east from Java to the island of Timor form a necklace joined to South-East Asia. The islands of Timor, Sumba and Flores are close to Australia but linked by stepping-stones to Asia, not to Australia. Sumba lies within the Australasian avifaunal region, but many birds there are close to Eurasian birds – and can even be the same species.

Birds can fly from island to island, so you might expect Australian-origin birds on Sumba, Flores and Timor, and some Asian-origin birds because of links to Asia. This is the case. For example, there are no woodpeckers in Australia, but many woodpecker species in Europe, Asia and the Americas, and several woodpecker species on Sumatra and Java. The genus *Dendrocopus*, woodpeckers you find in England, occurs on Flores, close to Sumba. You can stand on the east coast of Sumba with binoculars and see Flores. Bird-watchers from England are familiar