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## Sumba Barn Owls

The potato-shaped island of Sumba lies at the crosshairs of latitude 10°S and longitude 120°E in Wallacea. It is south of the islands of Flores and Sumbawa in the Lesser Sunda chain of Indonesia. Sumba is about 210 km long with a surface area of 10 854 km<sup>2</sup>.

At 1225 m, the highest point is Gunung (meaning Mount) Wanggameti. The island experiences a dry winter season from May to November and a wet summer season around December to April. Annual rainfall is between 500 mm on the south coast and 2000 mm on the inland hills. Closed-canopy forest, comprising mostly deciduous trees but also some evergreen, covers less than 11 per cent of the island and is confined to small pockets because locals repeatedly clear and burn vegetation for grazing and cultivation. These deciduous trees drop their leaves during the dry season, as northern oaks do in winter; skeletal, leafless trees in the forest that look dead.

A central plateau on Sumba formed of limestone and sandstone is cut in places by deep gorges. At night while looking for owls, it was cooler up there than down along the coast. Sumba is dotted with freshwater lakes, dependent on rainfall in the wet season. The lakes form in scoops of land on the high plateau and in lower elevation flood plains.

The population of Sumba is about 685 000 people, and the town of Waingapu on the north-eastern coast about 52 000 people. Waingapu is the administrative centre and main entry point for the island. To reach it you board one of the international flights to the island of Bali. At Denpasar Airport you stand in long queues next to pale travellers. Crowds of Balinese ask to carry your luggage, for