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Eviction

Disappearing woodland in Canberra gave some indication of pressures faced by Sumba owls. Humans degrade patches of forest, chase owls from their breeding sites and diminish food. For Little Sumba Hawk-Owls, an endemic island species, there was no place to go.

Habitat degradation is an abstract concept. We hear the term so often it loses its emotional impact. It is not an abstract to animals. How do owls cope? How do owls behave when prime habitat is taken away?

Along the new roadway in Canberra (see Chapter 35), loss of trees had increased the conflict (Duelling) between neighbouring male Boobooks; three of five pairs left, leaving two. Commensurate with loss of this habitat, a new pair showed up in suburban Cook where none had bred before. They tried to breed in sub-prime habitat. There was plenty of food – introduced mice, rats, sparrows and mynas – but the Boobooks had another problem. Too many big trees felled near the city left too few nest hollows. Animals like Brushtail Possums and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos were increasing and fighting over hollows that were left.

In 2005 a pair of Boobooks laid eggs in an Apple Box in a small park along a bike path. Houses lined both sides of the park. There were dozens of resident Common Brushtail Possums, in plague numbers because humans fed them. The possums left their tree hollows at night and some foraged on eucalypt flowers in the canopy. Others visited backyards and begged for food. That year some possums tried to enter the Boobook's nest hollow, and sometimes succeeded. Sulphur-crested Cockatoos stopped Boobooks from using one hollow and sometimes harassed them. As well, this pair of Boobooks faced increasing levels of Duelling