

Stygian Owls - *Asio stygius*

Click on image to see large picture, scroll down for information



The adjective Stygian comes from the Styx, the river in the underworld which the souls of the dead had to cross in Greek mythology. Thus, attributes of this owl's name are related to hell and darkness. The first published description of Stygian Owl was made in 1832 by Johann Georg Wagler.

Description: It is a medium to large dark owl with long and erectile ear tufts. The Stygian Owl has fuscous face, yellow eyes and blackish bill. It has almost bare toes, although the legs are feathered. On the back, it is almost sooty black, with dull white and buff barring and mottling. The front is rich buff, marked in a very close, herring-bone pattern of black streaks and cross bars. Wings are long and tail relatively short.

Size: Length 38-46 cm (15-18"). Wings 29.2-34.9 cm (11½ - 13¾"). Weight 632-675 g (22 ⅓ - 23¾ oz), females heavier than males.

Habits: Essentially nocturnal. It roosts during daytime in dense vegetation, but seems to be active mostly in more open vegetation. When alarmed, its ear tufts stand erectile, but when relaxed they are almost invisible. Stygian owls fly with fairly slow wing beats, occasionally glides over some distance.

Voice: A deep "whuof" with a descending inflection is repeated at intervals of several seconds by the male. The female occasionally utters a shrill call "miah", in response to the male. Both sexes vocalize "wak-wak-wak" when excited. Females and young produce a "cheet" when begging for food.

Hunting & Food: It is said to feed on bats. It was also reported the consumption of birds such as doves and secondarily small mammals and insects. Populations from south-east Brazil appear to prey mostly on small gregarious birds as grassquits and other Passerines. Birds are taken at their night time perches, detected by their own involuntarily sounds when touching the foliage. Stygian Owls normally hunt from a perch. Bats are captured on the wing.

Breeding: Virtually unknown. It seems to be able to nest both in trees and on the ground. This owl was observed using abandoned nests of other birds in trees. During the courtship period, male claps wings under body in flight. Female lays two eggs and incubates them alone. Both parents feed the young. Juveniles appear to have a deep blue pupil.

Mortality: Human persecution is probably the major cause of unnatural deaths. Stygian Owl characteristics such as long ears tufts, dark coloration and particularly the brilliant red reflection of the eyes when illuminated by lamps have been associated with the Devil. As an example, its vernacular name in Brazil is "coruja-diabo", or "devil's owl"!

Habitat: It is said to be a forest owl, commonly found high in the mountains. It also occurs in humid and semi-arid forests, in fully developed tropical rain forest and in low, thorny bush country from about 700m up to 3,000m above sea level. Usually absent from lowlands. On the other hand, field observations in south-east Brazil and Belize showed Stygian owls hunting mostly in savannah-like habitats. Thus, forests may be mostly used as roosting sites during daytime.

Distribution: It is found in parts of north-west and east Mexico, parts of Belize and Guatemala, in Cuba and the Isle of Pines, Hispaniola, Colombia, Ecuador, north-west and south Venezuela, south and central Brazil, all over Paraguay and north Argentina.



Distribution of the Stygian Owl - North, Central and South America.

Subspecies: There are six subspecies of Stygian owls, but not all are accepted by taxonomists. The first three are recognized by most authorities.

Asio stygius stygius - from north Brazil to east Bolivia, north-east Argentina and south-east Brazil. It includes *A. s. barberoi* according to some authorities.

Asio stygius robustus – from south Mexico discontinuously to north-west Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador. It includes *A. s. lambi* in accordance to some authors.

Asio stygius siguapa – Cuba and Island of Pines. It includes *A. s. noctipetens* for some authors.

Asio stygius lambi – south Mexico to Panama.

Asio stygius noctipetens – Hispaniola and Ile de Gonave.

Asio stygius barberoi - north Argentina and Paraguay.

Text and Range Map by [José Carlos Motta-Junior](#) & [Adriana de Arruda Bueno](#)

Department of Ecology

Institute of Biosciences

University of São Paulo, Brazil

The text above was a combination of literature reviewing and personal field experiences by the authors.

References:

BURTON, J. A. 1984. [Owls of the world: their evolution, structure and ecology](#). Revisited Edition. Tanager Books, Dover. 208 pp.

DEL HOYO, J., A. ELLIOT & J. SARGATAL 1999. [Handbook of the birds of the world. Barn Owls to Hummingbirds](#). Vol. 5. Barcelona, Lynx Edicions. 759 pp.

HUME, R. 1997. [Owls of the world](#). Parkgate Books, London. 192 pp.

KÖNIG, C., F. WEICK & J. BECKING 1999. [Owls. A guide to the owls of the world](#). Yale University Press, New Haven and London. 462 pp.

VOOUS, K. H. 1989. [Owls of the northern Hemisphere](#). The MIT Press, Cambridge. 320 pp.



Photo Copyright © [J.C. Motta-Junior](#) Stygian Owl – Juvenile



Photo Copyright © [J.C. Motta-Junior](#) Stygian Owl - Sub-Adult