

Norfolk Island Morepork – Back from the Brink

Introduction

On 21 June 2022, Australian Post issued a set of two stamps that celebrate the Norfolk Island Morepork (*Ninox novaeseelandiae undulata*). The Norfolk Island Morepork, a small, brown-mottled Owl, is an exclusive resident to the island; and is considered a distinctive sub species of the New Zealand Morepork (*Ninox novaeseelandiae*). It is one of the world's rarest owls.¹ Locally, the Norfolk Island Morepork owl was also known as the Boobook.²

But first, before looking at the current status of the Morepork, we must begin with the stamps.

The Stamps

The stamp set consists of two individual stamps and a sheetlet, all of which are issued by Australia Post under the “Norfolk Island” country designation.

Norfolk Island – Norfolk Island Morepork (21 June 2022)



Image source: Australia Post and author's collection

If you are wondering where Norfolk Island is located, then it can be found on a map some 1,600 kilometres (1,000 miles) North-East of Sydney in the Pacific Ocean. It lies between the French Overseas Territory of New Caledonia and New Zealand. It is an external territory of Australia and until around 2016, had its own postal authority which issued its own commemorative stamps. From that year, Australia Post began to issue “Norfolk Island” stamps under the “Australia” heading.

Note that the postal code for Norfolk Island is attached to New South Wales – NSW 2899 - and this is what appears on the first day of issue postmark.

¹ Source: Australia Post, First Day Cover commentary and Stamp Bulletin No 377, page 27.

² Source: <https://parksaustralia.gov.au/norfolk/discover/conservation/>

Australia Post also issued with the two stamps a sheetlet which pictured a Morepork chick:



Image source: Australia Post and author's collection

I like this sheetlet and I shall keep it intact. I am currently going through some Stamperija single stamp sheetlets and an irritating characteristic about them is that often, the bird in the foreground/background is a different species to the one depicted on the stamp. Not so here: in fact, the image on the right is important, because it illustrates the future of the Morepork on Norfolk Island.

Australia Post has also issued two First Day Covers (FDCs) as a complement to the stamps and the sheetlet. Here is the FDC which shows the two individual stamps. The postmark design is also simple, clean and appropriate:

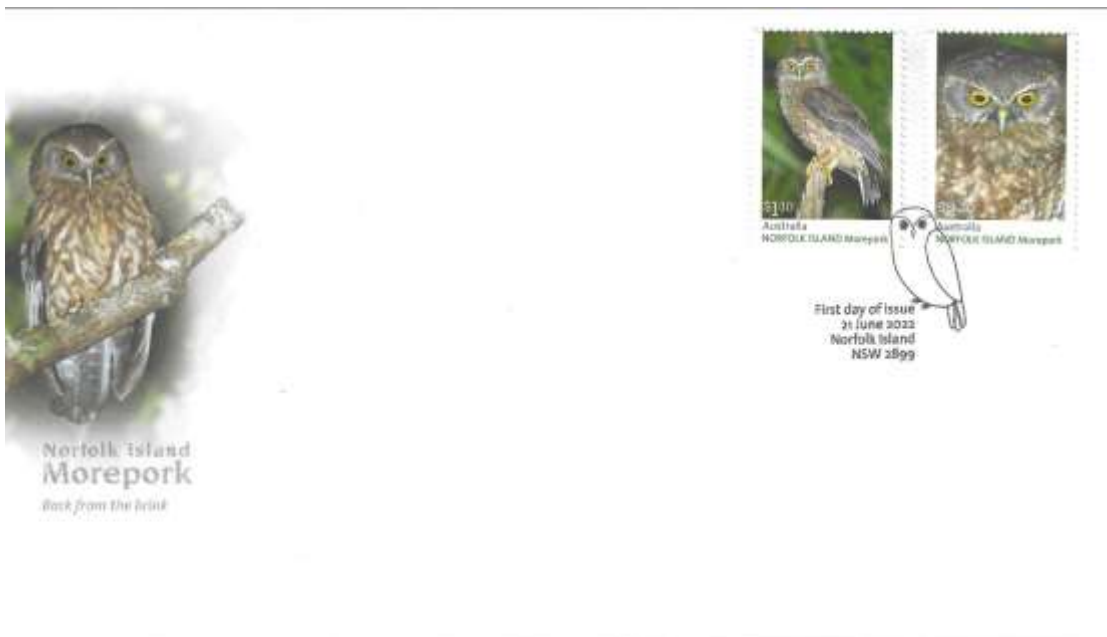


Image source: Australia Post and author's collection

Artist Simone Sakinofsky, from the Australia Post Design Studio designed these stamps and the FDCs. The stamps are gummed and were printed using offset lithography.

About the Norfolk Island Morepork

The Australia Post website explains that in the early 1980s, the Norfolk Island (NI) Morepork was locally listed as “Endangered” and heading for extinction: by the mid-1980s, there was only one bird, a female, remaining. Parks Australia reports that the last remaining NI Morepork – the last in the World – was named “Miamiiti”.

Looking back, one reason for the decline in the population was loss of habitat: an absence of sufficient large trees with the requisite hollows for nesting. Historical tree clearance had contributed to this habitat loss. Parks Australia reports that Norfolk Island was once entirely covered by sub-tropical rainforest, but that this type of vegetation is now confined to the NI National Park.³

Australia Post’s background note indicates that nest competitors also threatened the NI Morepork – including, for example, the Crimson Rosella (*Platycercus elegans*).⁴ Another factor in the decline was the absence of sufficient birds to ensure genetic variability.

Australia Post explains that a rescue (probably led by Parks Australia) introduced two male New Zealand Moreporks into Norfolk Island in 1987. The remaining female – Miamiiti – successfully mated with one of these males. This resulted in four hybrid chicks. Thereafter, the population grew to about 45-50 individual birds in 1999. Unfortunately, since 2011, there has been little sign of any successful breeding, until 2019 when two chicks appeared. Recent fieldwork indicates that the number of individual birds now stands at 25-35. The conservation efforts are therefore long from over.⁵

However, the discovery of the two fledglings has led to this “Back from the Brink” hope that underpins this stamp issue. ABC News Australia reports that Parks Australia and the staff of the Norfolk Island National Park as well as researchers from Monash University (Victoria, Australia) are continuing to monitor progress of the Morepork population, including these fledglings in particular.⁶

The same ABC News article also reports that Dr Rohan Clark, the avian ecologist from Monash University indicated that:

“Saving the Norfolk Island Morepork owl was vital work, despite their tiny stature and population. Norfolk Island, like many islands, has really unique biodiversity, and it's the sum of all these small species that makes our region so biodiverse.”

Birds of the World explains the status of the Morepork and NI Morepork sub-species:

³ Source: <https://parksaustralia.gov.au/norfolk/discover/conservation/>

⁴ A member of the African and New World Parrot family (Psittaculidae). It was introduced to the Island in the 1800s as a cage bird.

⁵ Source: <https://australiapostcollectables.com.au/stamp-issues/norfolk-island-morepork-back-from-the-brink>

⁶ Source: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-17/norfolk-island-morepork-owl-new-generation/12150012>

“Whereas Morepork populations on Tasmania and New Zealand are secure, two of this species’ subspecies are now extinct. Subspecies (albaria) has been extinct on Lord Howe Island since the 1950s as a result of forest clearance and the deleterious effects of introduced species, whilst no pure (undulata) of Norfolk Island survived into the present millennium. The population there now comprises hybrid (undulata) × (novaeseelandiae). The latter population continues to exhibit very low productivity and may require additional conservation interventions to save it from extinction.”⁷

Sadly, the genetically pure sub-species of Norfolk Island Morepork (*Ninox novaeseelandiae undulata*) is therefore no more, instead what we have is a unique hybrid of the NI Morepork and the New Zealand/Tasmanian based Morepork.⁸ But nonetheless, that there are Moreporks at all on Norfolk Island is a reason to celebrate, not least with this philatelic issue. These stamps hopefully give publicity to the efforts by Parks Australia and the Norfolk Island National Park, in their work to support the new generation of NI Moreporks.

Parks Australia reports that amongst other things, the local conservation effort in the Norfolk Island National Park is directed at protecting the sub-tropical forest, by weeding out the invasive species. These include, in particular, the Cherry Guava Plant (locally called “Porpei”) which has taken over parts of the National Park and impacts on the native habitat.⁹

Parks Australia indicates that in October 2019, it received a Government grant of \$400,000 (AUS) to securing the future of the Norfolk Island Morepork and also the Norfolk Island Green Parrot, which is also endangered. The NI Morepork is one of 20 priority birds targeted by the Australian Government under its threatened species programme.

If you were wondering what the NI Morepork eats, then I can confirm that the Morepork feeds on a diet of insects (beetles, moths and spiders) as well as small birds, rodents (rats and mice) and lizards. It generally feeds from dusk until dawn, but Birds of the World also reports that on Norfolk Island, the Morepork may also hunt in the daytime. The Morepork catches its prey either in its beak or using its sharp talons.¹⁰

⁷ Source: <https://birdsoftheworld.org/bow/species/morepo2/cur/introduction>

⁸ Source: <https://parksaustralia.gov.au/norfolk/discover/conservation/>

⁹ Source: <https://parksaustralia.gov.au/norfolk/discover/conservation/>

¹⁰ Source: <https://www.doc.govt.nz/nature/native-animals/birds/birds-a-z/morepork-ruru/>

Other Stamp Issues

If you are interested in collecting stamps which feature the Morepork, then there are a number to choose from, from a variety of countries, including two issues from Norfolk Island:

Norfolk Island – Birds – NI Morepork (17 July 1984)



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

Norfolk Island – Birds – Morepork (22 July 1970)



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

Note the local name "Boobook" on both these stamps.

São Tome and Príncipe



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

But we end this article with the FDC of the Minisheet:



Image source: Australia Post and author's collection

Further information on birds of Norfolk Island can be found on the Parks Australia web page for the NI National Park:

<https://parksaustralia.gov.au/norfolk/do/birdwatching/>