

New early Pliocene owls from Langebaanweg, South Africa, with first evidence of *Athene* south of the Sahara and a new species of *Tyto*

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The fossiliferous Upper Varswater Formation at Langebaanweg (South Africa) produced remains of at least five species of owls (Strigiformes). *Tyto richae* sp. nov. is the first palaeospecies of Tytonidae described from an African fossil site, though indeterminate remains referable to the genus *Tyto* are known from the Middle Miocene of Morocco, the early Pliocene of Ethiopia, and the Pliocene of Tanzania. *Athene inexpectata* sp. nov. is not only the earliest documented fossil evidence for the genus worldwide, but also the first record of a species of *Athene* in Africa south of the Sahara. Proportions of its hind limb indicate that *At. inexpectata* sp. nov. probably has been as terrestrial as its modern relative *At. cunicularia*. A few additional remains represent the earliest fossil evidence for the genera *Asio* and *Bubo* on the African continent, though the poor preservation of these bones prevents more detailed identifications. A distal tibiotarsus of a small owl about the size of *At. inexpectata* sp. nov. indicates the presence of a fifth, as yet indeterminate, species of owl at Langebaanweg. Biogeographical and palaeoecological implications of this assemblage of owls are discussed.

Key words: Aves, Strigiformes, Tytonidae, Strigidae, Varswater Formation, Pliocene, Africa, Langebaanweg.

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