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Borders

Though breeding Southern Boobooks on Black Mountain fought with possums, gliders and other enemies (Chapter 11), they spent more time watching each other. When not hunting or caring for their families, they watched territory boundaries – the imaginary walls set through bushland. They patrolled these borders in case a neighbour strayed over, and they treated borders almost like stone fences. The intrusion by another owl could trigger a bout of Boobook calls, even a physical fight. The crossover could be ‘unintentional’, if intent can be attributed to an owl. Maybe the intruder failed to see the borderline, the line where his land stopped and his rival’s land started. Or maybe it was ‘intentional’, that is, he was testing his neighbour’s resolve in some form of contest. Most of this patrolling and conflict was limited to males, and mostly they seemed to know precisely where the borderline fell.

Sometimes a male would fly up to a border, stop and call to his neighbours. He would lean forward, call with the two-note Boobook call, repeating it for as long as an hour. If a Boobook responded, a contest might begin – owls yelling at each other on territory borders, sometimes across a gully or a road. Sometimes they called every night for weeks until the persevering intruder seemed to shift the border a few metres into his neighbour’s patch. The male won a clump of forest or maybe a shaded gully, a grove of trees that benefited his breeding attempt. The loss of a good patch of forest probably hurt the defeated male.

On nights when conflict broke out, the males barely noticed human observers standing under the tree writing. They ignored Swamp Wallabies thudding past snapping sticks, or kangaroos bounding through crackling leaf litter.