



Alistair Smith and the owl.

Photo: Colin Brammall

American professor solves Customs owl hunt

While Customs officers probably take its presence for granted, the first thing that visitors to Customs House in Canberra notice on entering the foyer of the building is the imposing figure of a two-metre tall Grizzly Bear *Ursus arctos horribilis*.

Fewer visitors would be aware that just around the corner in the ACT office is another stuffed animal - this time an owl.

Both animals have been a part of Central Office for so long that their provenance is difficult to determine. However, as the owl was in the ACT office, which is a part of Cargo Branch, National Manager Philomena Carnell thought it appropriate that it be identified so that a plaque could be placed on its stand.

Keen amateur ornithologist and Customs officer Alastair Smith readily volunteered to undertake the task of identifying the owl. Clients of the ACT office had indicated that the bird might be North American in origin so the search began there. A perusal of North American and European field guides pointed to a possible suspect although the colouration of the owl did not necessarily match the plates.

Feathers are known to fade over time so, to confirm his hunch, Alastair took photos of the owl and posted an email to an Australian birdwatching discussion forum, asking for people with an interest in owls to peruse the photos.

David Spector, a biology professor from Connecticut State University and lifelong bird watcher, was reading the forum to obtain background information on Australian birds, as he intends to visit Australia. He asked to view the photographs and confirmed Alastair's identification that the bird is in fact a Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus*.

He further commented that, "the richly coloured facial discs, prominent black facial border, prominent white bib, and relatively fine ventral barring with little ventral streaking, are all typical of a Great Horned Owl and seem to rule out any other species. The 52-centimetre measurement is suggestive of a smallish individual, presumably a male.

Great Horned Owls occur all over the United States, mostly in Canada, and southward through Central and South America to the Straits of Magellan. They are one of the most widespread species of owls. They are found in woods, mountain forests, desert canyons, marshes, city parks, and urban forests. The owls prefer open areas to dense woodlands or nest sites close to the edge of a forest where they can hunt. Great Horned Owls eat a wide variety of prey, both small and large, including rabbits, squirrels, shrews, snakes insects and birds (even other owls).