

Additional records of the Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewitti* Hume, 1873, in Melghat Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra

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F. R. Blewitt first collected a specimen of this owlet from the dense forests of eastern Madhya Pradesh on 14 th December 1872 (Hume 1873). A. O. Hume dedicated the bird to his friend and placed it in a new genus that he erected for it, calling it *Heteroglaux blewitti* (Hume, 1873). In the foothills of the Satpura Mountains north of Shahada in Maharashtra, India, the endemic Forest Owlet that was thought to be extinct was rediscovered after 113 years on 25 th November 1997, in a tropical dry deciduous forest, by American ornithologists (King and Rasmussen 1998). Subsequently during the surveys conducted by Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) from June 1998 to June 1999, four nesting pairs of Forest Owlets were recorded in Toranmal forest range (Maharashtra) between 400-500 m. elevation, in October 1998. Three of these nests were found at Shahada, while one nest was found in Taloda, about 30 km from Shahada (Ishtiaq 2000). Further, in the second phase of this study, conducted from 28 January to 22 February 2000, 25 Forest Owlets were located from two new sites in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. *Forest Newsletter for Ornithologists* Vol. 1 No. 1-2 (January-April 2004) 13 Owlets had never been reported from these sites (Ishtiaq 2000). Rithe (2003) reported nine Forest Owlets from the Satpuras in Melghat. Two birds at Raipur, two at Malur, four at Jamodapadao and one at Mahendri, about 100 km to the east of Melghat.

Records of two new sites:

All these above-mentioned locations are quite different from the additional sightings recorded on 19-vi-2002 and 1-vi-2003 and described by us here. On 19-vi-2002, Raju Kasambe and Jayant Wadatkar visited the Harisal range of Melghat Tiger Reserve, in Malur bit No. 597, north of Malur village. Amidst a forest of *Tectona grandis*, *Madhuca indica*, *Terminalia tomentosa*, *Schleichera oleosa*, *Lagerstroemia parvifolia*, *Boswellia serrata*, *Anogeissus latifolia*, *Lanne grandis*, close to Bhavar Nullah and ploughed fallow fields, at an altitude of less than 100m, one Forest Owlet was sighted early in the morning. No calls were heard. The owlet was perching in direct sunlight and gave excellent viewing and photographic opportunity for 30 minutes. It then flew to the nest, in a teak tree (*Tectona grandis*), situated at a height of 13-15 m above the ground. The narrow nest entrance suggested that a Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala* (Linnaeus, 1766) had excavated the nest. Eight pellets were collected from under the nest and revealed a skull with a beak of an unidentified warbler in one pellet, and feathers with bird bones in the rest of them. About 200m from this Forest Owlet, two Spotted Owlets *Athene brama* (Temminck, 1821) were seen. A nest of this pair was seen at a height of 10-12m in the same region. Interestingly we also recorded Jungle Owlet *Glaucidium radiatum* (Tickell, 1833) and Mottled Wood-Owl *Strix ocellata* (Lesson, 1839) from the same locality. This fact indicates the importance of conservation of this area. A study to explore possible associations between these species needs to be undertaken (Pande, *in press.*). Competition for food between the Forest Owlet and other

owls may not be significant due to the partly diurnal habit of the former. One year later, on 1-vi-2003, members of ELA Foundation and we visited a different location in the same area, south of Malur village. On the Chaurakund-Malur road, at 6.45 a.m., a Forest Owlet was seen perched in the shade of the trunk of a teak tree. It was at a height of about 10m. After some time it flew to an adjacent tree, perched in direct sunlight and uttered the typical 'cooing' call. The mate answered this call from a distance of about 100m. Satish Pande was ready with the audio recording equipment and Amit Pawashe and he recorded the call of the Forest Owlet. Other members of the team (Prashant Deshpande, Chandrahas Kolhatkar and Mohan Panse) made a video recording. The typical tail wagging and cooing were documented. The bird retreated to the shady portion of the tree and dozed when the temperature started climbing. It is possible that Rithe (2003) has already reported the same pair from this area of Malur. We therefore do not claim it as a new record but merely state the observation. During this visit we were accompanied by a local Korku youth. We then decided to search in new areas for Forest Owlets, by playing the recently taped call every half a kilometre, as we proceeded further. After a journey of about 10km we were rewarded. Near the Jambukuwa water hole, on bit No. 591 of the Harisal range, one Forest Owlet answered our tape-recorded call. This was the second new addition to the existing reported numbers of the Forest Owlet. By this time it was late afternoon with the mercury reaching 46 0 C. Our movements had become arduous due to the tormenting heat. We therefore stopped our search.

Conservation and threats:

The Forest Owlet is endemic to this area of the Satpura range and is Critically Endangered (BirdLife International 2001, IUCN 2002). This species is also included under Schedule I (Part III: Birds) of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. Our two new records of this endemic species are significant because every addition to the existing documented numbers, and identification of each new site, play an important role in ascertaining its population size, density and distribution. It enables planning of future conservation measures for the survival of this owlet. Ishtiaq (2000) emphasized an immediate need to declare all the rediscovered sites as Important Bird Areas (IBA), as they meet the criterion of a Globally Threatened Species (BirdLife International 2001). Further, Ishtiaq (2000) has indicated that the major threat for the Forest Owlet is habitat degradation. Around 5,000ha of forest had recently been clear-felled to serve as a rehabilitation site for people displaced by the Sardar Sarovar Dam. Besides this, we have noticed that shifting cultivation is practiced extensively in the area occupied by Forest Owlet. Hence not only their habitat but also nest trees are at a great risk. Tree felling in the area occupied by the Forest Owlet should be immediately checked. Another larger danger lurks in the form of the proposed Upper Tapi Irrigation Project, Stage II, which threatens to submerge the 244ha of prime habitat of this rare owlet. James Duncan (2003) has emphasized that more intensive research and management effort is needed to prevent this species from disappearing from our planet. The balance unfortunately appears to be unfavorably tilted against the Forest Owlet.

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