

Elusive Prowlers Of The Night



Brown Hawk Owl

It was refreshing and mildly surprising to find the idyllic and pristine natural beauty of the Dodanduwa Lagoon, only a twenty-minute drive from the seaside hotels and pulsating nightlife of the lively tourist hub of Hikkaduwa. Home to a rich diversity of plants, insects, reptiles, birds and animals, as well as tranquil islets where Buddhist monks have retreated into meditative isolation, the Lagoon is best explored in boats.

Words Gehan Rajeev and L J Mendis Wickramasinghe **Photographs** Nethu Wickramasinghe and L J Mendis Wickramasinghe

From large sized Spot-bellied Eagle Owls to the smallest Scops Owls, Sri Lanka is home to 12 different species of owls, with two of them found only here. Their large eyes are perfect for night time hunting. Rather bulky head giving it a stout appearance and the ability to rotate 270°, keen eye sight even at very low light conditions, a sharp beak and talons all perfectly merge to produce the ultimate elusive prowler of the night—the owl.

Although owls are considered as nocturnal birds of prey, very few such as the endemic Chestnut Backed Owlet hunts during the day time. It was indeed a rare sighting at Deraniyagala, when we heard the news of this quite rare species nesting not within the jungle, but in a hole of a wooden utility pole close to a home garden. In this man made habitat, it was astonishing to see that the couple seemed undeterred to all the commotion that was going on.

Owl's peculiar head bobbing is a result of their asymmetrically placed ears, which help them to pin point their prey in extreme low light conditions. Above all, owls can fly without the slightest hum thanks to their in-built modified feathers. Their calls, all different from one another may repel many in fear of the many myths and legends that have lingered for thousands of years. The Devil Bird or the Spot-bellied Eagle Owl perhaps has the most number of tales, for possibly it is the only bird which possesses a more human like call in the deep jungles of Sri Lanka. Although one might hear their calls, to see one in the darkness needs much patience and luck.

Going back in time, while returning after a night transect from the Kalu Mukalana Forest, we found ourselves deep in the jungle and to our dismay lost. But at a distance in the dark, we could see the Sankapala Temple; so we headed towards the temple and were quite exhausted by the time we reached our destination. While seated within the premises, from a distance we saw a figure moving hither and thither in a hurry. Dogs started to bark and the figure did not run but astonishingly took flight—it was a Spot-bellied Eagle Owl.

Many owls feed on small mammals, or rodents, but the Fish Owl as its name implies is specialised in fishing. One full moon night, we were camping at the Makara camp site of the Nilgala National Park. It was the dry season, water was scarce and on the riverbed something caught our attention. We quickly grabbed our binoculars, and thanks to the moonlight we were able to witness the amazing sight of a family of four Fish Owls. And what was going on was in fact a special fishing lesson with the adults giving their young ones a firsthand experience on fishing. They were bringing in live fish and dropping in front of the young owls and the little ones were hopping and pushing the live fish in an attempt to feed.

As a rule of thumb, if you hear an owl, look for the tallest place possible—preferably an open area or even better a tall dead tree. At Kalubowitiyana, while researching on a rare amphibian, we heard an unusual call that sounded like a long whistle (whooooo... whooooo). This was the first time we have heard it, but we all surmised that this could be of an owl. We applied the rule of thumb and looked for a dead tall tree. There was a dead Fishtail palm (Kithul palm), so we pointed our torches towards it. The sight that greeted our wandering gaze was unbelievable—not two but four huge eyes staring at us. They were Bay Owls, the most rarest of the twelve species. We heard the same call again from another direction, and to our astonishment yet another two. This was a family of Bay owls, we had seen the young ones first and the parents at a distance.

Serendib Scops Owl, one of the small owls recently discovered from the island, is the last to be added to the list of endemic birds in Sri Lanka

‘Owl pellets’ are one of the best ways scientists use to assess the diet of owls. These are in fact the undigested parts of the prey they consume such as bones, nails and fur, which they regurgitate and are often found close to their day

roosting sites. It was once at Sooriya Wewa, in one of the transects we observed such owl pellets in plentiful. On close observation we were lucky enough to see who they belonged to. These were of two Barn Owls. Thanks to this couple, we were able to identify a large number of rodents, which we had never encountered before.

Serendib Scops Owl, one of the small owls recently discovered from the Island, is the last to be added to the list of endemic birds in Sri Lanka. The owl can be found in the lowland rain forests of Sri Lanka. It's unusual 'poo-ooo' call was what helped to locate the bird, and interestingly is similar to a call of an amphibian found in the same habitat, called the Nagao's ramanella, a type of pug-snout frog. Although till very recently Frog Mouths and Night Jars were considered to be owls—since they too are nocturnal hunters very much similar in appearance to owls, genetic evidences proved that they belong to an altogether different family, but in Sinhala their native names still remains as “Bassa” for owl in Sinhala.

