The Devil Bird of Sri Lanka

Posted on
A young spot-bellied eagle owl

The ‘devil bird’, known by natives as the *Ulama*, is as feared as it is famous in Sri Lanka, its cry said to be an omen of death. No one has ever fully proved the real identity of this folkloric creature, but the prime candidate, a formidable avian predatory, is no less intriguing than the cryptid it inspires.

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Photographs Kithsiri Gunawardhena

An adult spot-bellied eagle owl keeping a watchful eye over the nest from a distance

According to Sri Lankan folklore, there was once a jealous husband who doubted the paternity of his child. The mother and the child met a tragic end, and it is said that the spirit of the mother lives on in the devil bird, her anguished wails forever sounding through the forest.

There are various contenders for the real species behind the mythical devil bird whose blood-curdling cry is believed to portend the death of a loved one. The spot-bellied eagle owl is the most likely candidate. The largest of the 12 species of owls found in Sri Lanka, it flies silently through its thick jungle habitat on wings that span well over a metre. From beneath its prominent brown and white ear tufts glare huge black eyes, able to spot prey from high in the air in the darkness of night.

It was on a trek through the jungle outside Bandarawela that we first heard the strange high-pitched call of an unknown creature in the trees above us. The gush of a nearby waterfall made it difficult to locate the origin of the sound, but we were determined to solve the mystery, and followed the call until our torches revealed something out of the ordinary: a spot-bellied eagle owl perched on a branch. That call was indeed very striking, but it’s not the only sound the bird makes – like most creatures, it has a range of cries that serve different behavioral purposes.

As the forest habitat of this rare and beautiful predatory bird continues to degrade, its future hangs in a balance

Sightings of the eagle owl are rare, thanks to the increasing presence of humans in formerly forested territory in Sri Lanka. Unlike many wild creatures who adapt to urban settings, this one will make its nests in thick jungle only. The birds return to the same nesting sites year after year, several of which we've had the privilege of seeing for ourselves. As the forest habitat of this rare and beautiful predatory bird continues to degrade, its future hangs in a balance.

Distributed across all parts of the Island, in both dry and wet zones, the owls do not necessarily build their own nests. Instead they occupy tree holes or previously abandoned stick nests, laying a single egg and taking turns keeping a watchful eye until the chick sets out on its own.

A rare sighting of a spot-bellied eagle owl during the day, Wilpattu National Park

The largest of Sri Lanka's owl species, the spot-bellied eagle owl preys on a wide range of creatures, including some fairly large mammals, birds and reptiles. A glimpse of this formidable creature in the open is all that's required for the forest to come alive with alarm calls from distressed potential prey.

Although they hunt mainly at night, we once witnessed an individual going about its business at dusk. Swooping down upon a medium-sized black-naped hare in the undergrowth at Sooriyawewa, it held the animal tight in its sharp talons, spread its huge wings, and took to the air with its prey. The whole encounter was over in a moment.

These elusive creatures are even harder to spot during the daytime.On safari in Wilpattu National Park one day, a bird – flying too fast to identify – crashed into the back of the vehicle ahead of us. It was only when we approached it, lying motionless on the road, that we realized it was a spot-bellied eagle owl. Our guide picked it up and put it on a branch, and it was just a couple of minutes before it regained consciousness and flew back deep into the jungle.

As time goes by, we learn more and more about this extraordinary predator, but that knowledge seems to have done nothing to dampen the superstitious beliefs that surround the spot-bellied eagle owl, and its alter ego, the devil bird of Sri

Lanka. Long may this sensational myth live on.