

ASIAN BIRD: NEW DISCOVERY

Sri Lanka's Serendib Scops Owl

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Introduction

Since the Serendib Scops Owl *Otus thilohoffmanni* was discovered in 2001 it has been observed in the rainforests of Sri Lanka by many people. Now nearly every birdwatcher living in, visiting or planning to visit the island looks forward somehow to seeing this attractive little creature. Endemic to Sri Lanka, the species is so secretive that it eluded all avifaunal surveys of the country, begun by the Dutch more than 200 years ago. How many ornithologists and other birdwatchers must have explored the island's rainforests across the decades unaware that a spectacular bird unknown to science was perched not far from them!

Discovery and description

I first noted its vocalisation in February 1995. Next month I was able to make audio recordings of it. Comparative analysis using these made me nearly certain that the author was an owl rather than any other nocturnal creature, and of a species unknown

in Sri Lanka. The news was passed, and the recordings played, to a few colleagues in ornithology. Amongst them Upali Ekanayake, an expert on Sri Lankan bird sounds, heard it in the field in December 1996, and agreed that it was an owl. My attempts to see the bird, however, were not successful, despite two close encounters, in the company of Jonathan Eames in October 2000 and Phil Hall two months later.

After these experiences I thought the probability very high that the owl was a new species. Pamela Rasmussen, working on South Asian birds at the time, contacted me when Jon conveyed the news. After listening to my recordings she, too, agreed it could be a new species of owl.

On the memorable night of 23 January 2001 I was fortunate actually to see my quarry, after pursuing it for six years. It was just after dawn that the first-ever observations of the species were made, in a flashlight beam, at the Sinharaja rainforest. Ed Hagen, who happened to be there,

Plate 1. Serendib Scops Owl *Otus thilohoffmanni*. From left: Chandima Kahandawala, Kithsiri Gunawardena holding first bird captured (a male), Deepal Warakagoda. Morapitiya Forest, August 2001.



shared the spectacle. Not three weeks later a dash of luck and the skill of wildlife photographer Chandima Kahandawala produced an acclaimed set of photographs of the bird. With our inexperience in tracking it, success came only after a pursuit of several hours in the dark on difficult terrain inside another tract of rainforest, the one in which it had first been heard.

Pam confirmed the owl as a new species when she saw these photos. A project was launched, with the support of several organisations and individuals, to study the new bird. Nanda Senanayake, Kithsiri Gunawardena, Udaya Sirivardana, Niran Caldera, Chandima and I carried out the field work, with Pam as scientific advisor. The study team visited many forests in the island's Wet Zone and adjacent Intermediate Zone to check for the presence or absence of the owl in these, hence its distribution, and to learn about its behaviour and ecology. The work involved moving in these forests from dusk to dawn, listening to night sounds and trying to discern the owl in the "night chorus". Tiring walks in the dark in wet, leech-infested terrain suddenly brightened up when we detected it! Some nights the survey was hampered halfway by heavy rain and we had to walk back to base to dry and de-leech ourselves.

Plate 2. Serendib Scops Owl *Otus thilohoffmanni*. First bird captured, a male. Morapitiya Forest, August 2001.



CHANDIMA KAHANDAWALA

Other times we took a little rest around midnight, sitting on portable stools, rocks or logs, or lying down on the forest floor. Two novel techniques were developed by the team during the study, for observing this and similar species by artificial light with less disturbance, and for capturing them with mistnets in the dark (see Warakagoda & Ramussen 2004: 105).

The team carried out its research until early 2004, when enough detail had been gathered, and the type specimen collected, to write the description of the new species. Collection was delayed until November 2003, as we strongly believed this should be done only if sound information on the population and distribution of the new species justified it. By now we knew of the existence of about 45 individuals, and that the species was restricted to large tracts of rainforest within the Wet Zone (roughly the south-west quadrant) of the island.

The type description was published in June 2004 (Warakagoda & Rasmussen 2004). The species was given the scientific name *Otus thilohoffmanni* after Thilo W. Hoffmann, Sri Lanka's leading worker for nature conservation, particularly for his role in saving Sinharaja, where it was discovered. 'Serendib' was chosen as being an ancient name for Sri Lanka and to signify the serendipity of the discovery.

The new species is a small scops owl about 17 cm in length, with a short tail, and almost uniformly rufescent upperparts but for the presence of small black spots all over the body. The face is a little darker, and underparts paler than upperparts, with the belly becoming whitish. It has no distinct, "true" ear-tufts, but see below. The irides are orange-yellow in the male and yellow in the female and juvenile. The beak, legs and claws are whitish. The legs are feathered on the tibia and upper tarsi. The vocalisation comprises a single note, *pu'u'u*, repeated at long intervals. Male and female call in the same pattern but in different keys.

After this, the team has continued the study at a much slower pace. Additional information has now come to light on the daytime roosting and camouflage behaviour, breeding and distribution of the species.

New findings

At the time of the type description we knew that birds of a pair roosted fairly close together or well apart within their territory. Later we learnt that in some pairs the birds roost together or very close. A fledgling has been observed roosting with an adult male. Roosting height varies from about 1 to 2.5 m. A well-concealed place is chosen in dense vegetation in the undergrowth or just above it. Here



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Plate 3. Serendib Scops Owl *Otus thilohoffmanni* male, with facial disc normal. Kitulgala Forest, August 2006.



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Plate 4. Serendib Scops Owl *Otus thilohoffmanni* female, partially displaying "pseudo-ear tufts". Kitulgala Forest, June 2006.

Plate 5. Serendib Scops Owl *Otus thilohoffmanni* pair at daytime roost, showing "pseudo-ear tufts", female on left. Sinharaja Forest, January 2006.



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Plate 6. Serendib Scops Owl *Otus thilohoffmanni* juvenile at daytime roost, with male behind. The “pseudo-eartufts” are more pronounced in the partially formed facial disc of a juvenile. Kitulgala Forest, April 2006.

the bird sits on an almost or entirely horizontal twig, usually close to dead leaves. Its size, shape and coloration blend it in perfectly with the surroundings, making it hard to detect.

When an owl is in “alert mode” at its daytime roost, in reaction to possible danger in the vicinity, it quickly adopts a stance which disguises it as a short, upright, broken branch. It tightens body feathers, which are otherwise loose and relaxed, to acquire a narrower appearance. At the same time it adjusts the feathers of the facial disk, forehead and crown to give the appearance of the top of such a branch. This latter arrangement is adopted also by species of owl which have two obvious, separate ear-tufts, which are erected to enhance this effect. The Serendib Scops Owl, which does not possess ear-tufts, achieves a similar effect by compressing and flattening feathers on the forehead, forecrown and sides of the facial disk, and folding feather tracts on the forehead at the edges of the disk over the inner part of the eyes.

This makes the top left and right edges of the disk stand out, with also the support of adjacent crown feathers, giving an impression of short ear-tufts. Another result is an obvious, broader and deeper V on the forehead, showing up more white, than in a bird in “relaxed mode”.

At night the Serendib Scops Owl adopts this “pseudo-eartuft” arrangement only very rarely, according to our observations, probably because there is no significant advantage of such visual camouflage in the dark. It has been known that in similar situations species of owls lacking true ear-tufts adopt a camouflage pose which suggests the presence of small ear-tufts (see König *et al.* 1999: 28).

The first direct evidence of the breeding of the species was the observation of a fully fledged juvenile roosting with an adult male in March 2006. The young bird was slightly smaller than the adult, with incompletely developed facial disk. It had yellow irides as in an adult female. Its coloration otherwise resembled that of an adult.

Serendib Scops Owl is now known from five forest reserves. We have detected about 100 individuals of the species. On our present knowledge we would estimate its total population at 200–250.

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