

HOOT



A
CEYLON PRESS
TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S
OWLS

CONTENTS

1

IN A WORD OR TWO

2

THE BROWN FISH OWL

3

THE BROWN WOOD OWL

4

THE COLLARED SCOPS OWL

5

THE INDIAN SCOPS OWL

6

THE SPOT-BELLIED EAGLE OWL

7

THE SRI LANKA BAY OWL

8

THE SRI LANKA SERENDIB SCOPS OWL

9

THE SRI LANKA CHESTNUT-BACKED OWLET

In a
Word
or Two

Arguments rage over quite how many birds are endemic to Sri Lanka. Of the almost 500 bird species that have been documented on the island, experts argue that only somewhere between 34 and 23 are truly endemic – a mere 5 or 6 per cent of the avian population.

To put this in context, the authoritative International Ornithologists' Union classes 255 birds worldwide as owls of one kind or another. Looked at from this perspective Sri Lanka is something of a high achiever - a country that has 0.01% of the world's land mass hosts 0.8% of its endemic owl species - the Sri Lanka Serendib Scops-Owl and Sri Lanka Chestnut-Backed Owlet.

Both species, by virtue of being endangered or nocturnal in preference are often hard to spot. You are more likely to see the some of the non-endemic species that have passed the challenging citizenship tests to become firmly resident in the country.

The Brown Fish Owl, more fondly known as the Brown Boobook, is some 13 inches in length. It is one of the most commonly seen owls, despite being nocturnal, having taken to roost in urban areas around Colombo and suburban zones with an easy going alacrity.

As it dives for one of the tasty little reptiles or mammals that make up its diet, it can often be seen being mobbed by other, more suspicious birds. Its range stretches from India and Sri Lanka into the nearer parts of China and Indonesia.

Similar in range though larger in length (at 17 inches) is the Brown Wood Owl. Harder to find despite its loud, reverberating hoots, the Brown Wood Owl's appearance offers you everything you might hope for in an owl: large serious black eyes set off within a frame of white feathers on darker ones.

The 10 inch Collared Scops Owl sticks to a similar Asian beat. It sport the same serious dark eyes but – like other scop owls, has those delightful tell-tale ears or head tufts - like Yoda in Star Wars - that give it the appearing of being able to listen to your every problem. In all these attributes, it is very similar to the Indian Scops Owl that has also made its home among the trees and hollows of the Sri Lankan forests.

Compared to its cousins, the Sri Lankan Serendib Scops Owl, is more muted in appearance, lacking the little ear tufts that so endear its relatives. It is a species new to science since just 2004, and, as a rainforest night roamer, is almost impossible to see.

The country's only other endemic owl is the Chestnut-backed Owlet , a small stocky fellow barely 8 inches long; but one that is at least more visible for it can be seen often during the day and into the early evening.

Modest taxological arguments range over the status and endemic-ness of the Sri Lanka Bay Owl which calls both Kerela and Sri Lanka home. Coming in at around 10 inches in length, with a white feathered body and gorgeous

white disc of a face, its eye area is picked out in darker feathers as if it has visited a Beauty Salon specialising in Baroque eye brows and eye lashes. It is happily well distributed - albeit a night creature. The

Barn Owl, though not endemic, is nevertheless, a common sight across the island, happy, as its name suggests, roosting around humans in old buildings.

Some 13 inches in length with a unmistakable white body and white disced face, it has acute hearing that it uses as its primary hunting sense – and it is one you might also need to harness for it has an ear-shattering shriek that it enjoys drawing out to its fullest extent.

All of these owls are most firmly pushed to the side lines by the Spot-bellied Eagle Owl, also known as the Devil Bird. This massive raptor, some 3 feet in length is the world's sixth largest owl; and well distributed in Sri Lanka's forests. Its grey and white markings make it easy to spot and the ledge-shaped tufts that lie horizontally over its eyes gives it a learned and quizzical look. But it is its savage, human-sounding shrieks that has granted it the greatest notoriety, for on the island it is also known as the Devil Bird and its cry is said to portend death.

THE BROWN FISH OWL



IMAGE COURTESY OF SOMASKANDA

Ranging right across South and South East Asia, including Sri Lanka, the Brown Fish Owl can be found in forests and wetlands. It feeds off anything meaty and aquatic and can be spotted with ease across the island, albeit most especially at night. It is one of the most successful owls about, breeding in numbers that give no concern as to its future.

THE BROWN WOOD OWL



IMAGE COURTESY OF KOSHY KOSHY

From Taiwan and Indonesia to India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, the Brown Wood Owl has marked out a safe and buoyant territory, its numbers posing no threat to its future. Barely 60 cm in size, it lives in forests and is very nocturnal. What marks it out as exceptional is its extraordinary streaked markings that run like the feathery waves of the sea across its chest.

THE COLLARED SCOPS OWL



IMAGE COURTESY OF JJ HARRISON

With tufty ears giving it almost everything you might ever want in a owl, the Collared Scops Owl has made its home from Pakistan to China and down into Sri Lanka. Best found at night in forests, it is a highly successful owl and barely 25 centimetres long.

THE INDIAN SCOPS OWL



IMAGE COURTESY OF CHARLES J. SHARP

Best identified by its soft “whuk whuk” call, the Indian Scops Owl has made its home from the eastern end of the Arabian land mass down into Sri Lanka. It is a small creature, barely 25 centimetres in length, and so well camouflaged with its brown feathery tufts that it is almost impossible to see. Nocturnal, and happiest in forests, it exists in the modern world in healthy numbers.

THE SPOT-BELLIED EAGLE OWL



IMAGE COURTESY OF N. A. NASEER .

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THE SRI LANKA BAY OWL



IMAGE COURTESY OF KASUN WITHANAGE

Arguments range with quiet modesty about whether or not the Sri Lanka Bay Owl can be called endemic, since it also calls Kerala home. Certainly obtaining citizenship for man or beast in Sri Lanka is a task often likened to putting a man on Jupiter; but as the bird is here and so

beautiful to boot, it would be churlish not to give it space in this Companion as one of the country's few (2 or 3 depending on the argument) endemic owls.

Small (10 inches maximum), with huge dark eyes, a stunning set of eye brows and an odd squeaky whistle, it is strictly nocturnal and rarely seen in the wet forests it most prefers to inhabit.

THE SRI LANKA SERENDIB SCOPS OWL



IMAGE COURTESY OF PETER WÄCHTERS HÄUSER/NATURLICHTER.DE

Something of a glamorous newcomer to the owl scene, the Sri Lanka Serendib Scops-Owl, one of the country only two endemic owls, was only scientifically discovered in 2004. Its detection was a long drawn out process for Deepal Warakagoda, the Sri Lankan ornithologist, and a pioneer in in natural history sound recordings.

. He first noted its sounds in 1995 – for it emitted the most distinctive quivering notes. It was not until 2001 that he actually saw the creature.

“It was just after dawn that the first-ever observations of the species were made, in a flashlight beam, at the Sinharaja rainforest. 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.”

It took until 2004 before sufficient further research had been done to justify naming the discovery as a totally new species of bird – the first since 1868, when the Sri Lanka Whistling-Thrush was described. Estimated to number no more than 700 specimens, its highly restricted range and nocturnal habits make it one of the most unlikely sights anyone will ever be so lucky as to witness.

THE SRI LANKA CHESTNUT-BACKED OWLET



IMAGE COURTESY OF [HTTPS://WWW.SRILANKANSAFARI.COM](https://www.srilankansafari.com)

Barely 8 inches in length, the Sri Lanka Chestnut-Backed Owlet, is one of two endemic owls that call Sri Lanka home. From Colombo to the hill country, and across the wet land zones, it is a shy and beautiful

bird whose range has shrunk alarmingly. Unlike most owls, it lives out its life both day and night so it is more present than most other owls. Its call, variously described as "kurr-kurr-kurr," "kraw-kraw" or "kao-kao", is low pitched; and its chestnut colour body and lack of ear tufts make it relatively easy to identify.



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