



A LIGHT IN THE DARK

THE OWLS OF LANKA

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE
TO THE OWLS OF SRI LANKA

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FOR GABBI

WISEST OF BEAUTIES

"Owl, you and I have brains. The others have fluff. If there is any thinking to be done in this Forest-- and when I say thinking I mean thinking--you and I must do it."

RABBIT, IN WINNIE-THE-POOH

1

THE DEVIL BIRD

Once upon a time, uncountable centuries ago, a woman sat done to enjoy a curry supper with her husband. With hindsight, she ought to have been more alert: after all, her husband making dinner was no usual thing. But then, nor was the curry, for nestling amongst the spices and vegetables she discovered a tiny finger. All that was left of her infant son.

Suspicion, jealousy, alcohol and an excess of testosterone were just some of the other apparent ingredients found in that fateful dinner. A husband deeply suspicious of his wife's fidelity; his acid distrust of his young's son's real paternity – it all came together in a grisly act of filicide. Murdering his uncertain heir, the man cooked and served up his tiny body to his wife.

Although murdering one's child is relatively common (in America, for example, there are some 2000 cases per year), combining the appalling deed with fine dining is so rare as to be almost unparalleled. Yet this, according to one of the most dogged folk myths of Sri Lanka, is exactly what occurred in that jungle one terrible night.

Unhinged by grief, the mother fled screaming into the forest, where the gods, exhibiting that kind of double edged kindness that all ancient gods seem to excel at. They turned her into a bird – the ulama, or devil bird, or to be still more exact, what is thought to be the Sri Lankan Spot-bellied Eagle Owl.

In his book "Seeing Ceylon," published in 1965, the remarkable Renaissance Burger, R. L. Brohier, surveyor, historian and the driving force behind the Gal Oya Reservoir, the island's largest water tank, famously described the "clucking strangling sobs" the bird makes - "a scream which froze the blood", "a series of

dreadful shrieks as if coming from a soul in great agony of torment.”

For so ghoulish and intemperate a description, this one has the rare advantage of being accurate. The owl’s call really does sound as if a small infant is being murdered; or his mother is wailing with unconsolable wretchedness. Long after the owl has flown away, the sound stays with you, not unlike a spicy meal itself or as if Beethoven’s Fifth had become entangled with Heavy Metal. Once heard, never forgotten.

The owl itself is huge – the sixth largest in the world, with a wingspan approaching six feet. Despite this, it is rarely seen – being not only almost wholly nocturnal but also sticking to the most impenetrable parts of large forests. Spotted in such places as Yala, Wilpattu, and Sinharaja, it has also been seen and – of course – heard in Kurunegala, Kandy – and Galagedera, with one dropping in with alarming mateyness several nights a year at The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Its visual coyness it a great pity for the bird is something of a looker, resembling a ghostly and very aristocratic dowager, given to looking at the world with quizzical mistrust, its ashy white feathers picked out with dark highlights like the ermine Robe of State worn by British monarchs at their coronation. Where it betters any monarch is in its gorgeous horizontal ear tufts – which can be around 3 inches in length, making the bird’s head appear as it has a pair of assistant wings of its own, a living, breathing Douglas DC-4.

Zealous vegetarians they are not, their diet consisting of meat, more meat, and then still more, in all shapes and sizes – from tiny cowering rodents to recorded feasts involving civets, jackets, deer, and even monkeys. They pass their carnivorous inclinations onto

their young from the start, raising them on meat before taking them off for short hunting trips to learn the juicy arts of entrapment.

Thankfully, civilization's perpetual intrusions have had little impact on their status, and they are widely recorded by numerate ornithologists – this despite the fact that mating pairs tend to lay but a single egg a year.

Sri Lanka marks the southernmost limit of their territory, which extends north to the Himalayas and east to Vietnam, making them, if not endemic to the island, then at least fully paid up residents. Even so, they stand as something of a standard-bearer for the island's owls in general, not just for their audacious glamour and history – but also that something quite so vast should live with such surreptitious ease in the modern world.

In this they are not alone.

2

A HAPPY
QUARTET

Almost 500 bird species have been recorded on the island – although arguments rage over quite how many are endemic to Sri Lanka. 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.

Altogether, the island is home to 12 owl species, nine of these resident in other Asian countries, most particularly around the Indian sub-continent; and one a tourist.

Of these nine, the Brown Wood Owl most resembles its ulama peer, being almost as large and with a cry that – if not murderous – is loud and distinctive, somewhere between a bark and a scream, the exact sound being subtly different according to their passing nationality.

Found in India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Taiwan, and south China as well as Sri Lanka, their call varies from being soft and low in India to being decidedly more forceful in Indonesia. Like the Devil Bird, it seems untroubled by the bellicose excesses of human impositions, being categorised as a species under no great existential threat – though it likes to hide in deep forest, making its public appearances at night. Its plumage, brown on top but wavy brown-white streaks on its belly, is no less lovely for coming from the Marks and Spencer's end of feather fashion.

Just as brown as the Brown Wood Owl is the Brown Fish Owl, a species common throughout south and

southeast Asia but which has inspired a healthy range of sub variants, the Sri Lankan version of which teeters on the giddy and celebrated edge of endemic ness. It is smaller and darker than its other fish owl cousins, about two feet in length and with an unremarkable white-brown plumage, not unlike a much loved duffle coat. Its fondness for fish means it is most easily spotted around coastlines, lakes, and rivers, but it is also regularly reported to being seen in the deeper jungle too.

It found its circuitous way into western taxonomy from a drawing made by a Dutch colonist on the island, the drawing being included in 1776 in an illustrated zoology book created by Peter Brown, a London based Danish conchologist and friend of Captain Cook's great botanist, Joseph Banks.

The picture's inclusion in a book published by a professor in Göttingen some decades later pushed the little owl into the European mainstream, where it was seized on by Linnaeus himself for inclusion in his groundbreaking "Systema Naturae," the birthplace of modern scientific classification systems.

Like the Brown Fish Owl, the Sri Lanka bay owl is another owl that teeters on the festive cusp of endemic ness. There are only two variants of this species recognised globally, one from India's Western Ghats, the other from Sri Lanka.

Whilst scientists continue to argue about whether or not the Sri Lankan variant should be promoted into a recognized and distinctive separate species or not, the bird itself goes about its life with relative happiness, slightly but not too disastrously threatened by habitat loss, its democratic liking for homes as varied as cloud a tropical jungle and open grasslands, ensuring that it can set up shop most anywhere.

But browner than the Brown Wood Owl or the Brown Fish Owl, and with so lovely a call that you might want to make it the telephone's ring tone you select for those you most love, is the Brown Hawk Owl, more fondly known as the Brown Boobook. Although no great looker, and little more than one foot in length, its gentle "ooo-ukkk, ooo-ukk" sound positions it at the most musical end of feral backing bands.

Of almost all the island's owl species, this one is famously to be spotted as easily in towns and cities as in the jungle; and gives Colombo as one of its main addresses. It is found throughout South and Southeast Asia and was first scientifically recorded in 1822 by Stamford Raffles, who found time in between founding Singapore and setting up London Zoo, to also nail such new species as a giant parasitic flower, a tropical hedgehog, a crab eating monkey and, of course the Brown Hawk Owl.

Its' near cousin in downtown Colombo is the Barn Owl which, though not endemic, is nevertheless, a common sight across the island, happy, as its name suggests, roosting around humans in old buildings. Indeed, it much prefers open spaces, uncluttered countryside and well as built environments over jungle and forest.

Some 13 inches in length with an unmistakable white body and white disced face, it is the Amazon Prime of the owl world, being found almost everywhere except Antarctica. Its gorgeous countenance notwithstanding, it has an ear shattering shriek that might give even the Devil Bird pause for thought, a clamour that seems to continue long after you feel it ought to cease.

3

CHAOS AND
EXCLUSIVITY

Despite their continual eagerness to classify and reclassify anything that has ever had a heartbeat, avian scientists have rarely yet to better the confusion they have sewn by including the word "scops" in the naming of three of the island's owls.

The word itself came from ancient Greek into Latin where it simply meant "owl." Quite how it got from this generalist description to give its name to just 59 of the world's 225 owl species is one of the more baffling eccentricities of taxology. Put most pedantically, it would mean that Sri Lanka's 3 opus species might better be called the Serendib Owl Owl, the Indian Owl Owl, and the Oriental Owl Owl.

Of these three, the Indian Scops Owl is the most pleasing. Little more than 10 inch long, it gazes calmly out at a bombastic world that stretches from the Arabian desert to the Indian sub-continent.

It has serious dark eyes that are delightfully crowned by a set of head tufts that make it so fetchingly Yoda-like that it seems able to listen to and understand your every problem. From gardens to forests, it is found everywhere, especially at night where its call, a simple solitary "whook-whook," radiates melodiously out from the tree cavities within which it nests. It errs on the more prolific side of owl potency, laying as many as 3 eggs a year.

Its near cousin, the Oriental Scops-Owl, is marginally larger but otherwise so close in appearance as to demand the full attention of loving mothers or careful scientists to better tell them apart. Better by far to spot the difference in their call for the Oriental Scops Owl has a more connected call, which repeats, like a waterfall, with a soft "tuk-tok-torok, tuk-tok-torok" sound.

But the last of the confusing named scops, the Serendib Scops Owl, is by a long measure, the rarest of the lot, their sighting quite justifiably promoting the week-long popping of champagne corks, speeches, and toasts. For this little beast – barely 7 inches in length – is the most glamorous newcomer to Sri Lanka's owl scene, and one of the country only two endemic owls.

Squat, modestly brown in plumage and with a head that might have been designed by SpongeBob SquarePants, it 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 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.

Little larger, at 7.5 inches in length, is Sri Lanka's only

other endemic owl, the Chestnut-Backed Owlet. Despite an absence of stylish eyebrow tufts to boast of, it is wholly adorable, its head round and dark; its solid little body bursting with compact determination and presence, its wings a chestnut brown, and its stomach clothed with white feathers flecked with dizzy brown highlights that would give any beauty salon the most enviable of professional reputations.

It can be found from Colombo to the hill country, but its range has shrunk alarmingly, and its existence is ever more under threat. Unlike most owls, it lives out its life both day and night - so it more present than most other owls. Its call, variously described as "kurr-kurrkurr," "kraw-kraw" or "kao-kao," is low pitched and is the best clue to spotting it for it is otherwise relentlessly shy.

The Chestnut-Backed Owlet is often confused with Sri Lanka's eleventh owl, the Jungle Owlet, a species that is found across the Indian sub-continent. Equally squat, square, and small, its plumage is less fetching being a sort of all round white and brown series of feathery waves.

Although most active at dawn and dusk, it can be seen through the day, often perching as still as a sniper for hours on end as it waits for the perfect snack to come by. Unlike the Chestnut-backed Owlet, this owlet is not in the least threatened by the disturbing advances of humankind and gets on quite happily raising an annual crop of new owlets from the 3 to 4 eggs they lay each year.

4

THE TOURIST

Owl purists and determined nationalists have long argued that the last and twelfth of the island's owls, the Short-Eared Owl should not be included on any island owl lists, it being more of a tourist than a resident. Its sightings, though common enough, remains sufficiently rare - and it is not known to have actually bred on the island.

Those few that do turn up probably come from breeding populations in Central Asia and the Middle East. Small and with a raspy cry only a mother could love, they are nevertheless strikingly beautiful, their layered and dark brown-to-white plumage giving them the appearance of zebras with wings. A super abundance of tiny black feathers around each eye, like theatrical mascara, finishes off a dazzling look.

Sri Lanka has many more striking birds than these 12 owls – birds with plumages that tap every part of the rainbow. In this respect, owls are something of an measured and acquired taste. But it is precisely because of this that they are quite so special – and so very marvellous.

In a world decimated by unending tsunamis of opinions and demands, facts that need checking and cheques that only bounce, the owl stands for that most old fashioned of virtues: wisdom. As that old nursery rhyme first recorded in Punch magazine in 1875 put it:

There was an owl liv'd in an oak
The more he heard, the less he spoke
The less he spoke, the more he heard.
O, if men were all like that wise bird.

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Centred on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel is a secret to most and a companion to some. Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

Renovated and furnished with art & antiques, its hills and valleys keep safe a rare seclusion.

Its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa; rubber, coffee, vanilla; cinnamon, coconuts; and scores of trees – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Its healthy menus fuse east with west, street food with fine dining. It can be viewed at www.flametreestate.com.

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Drop the general manager a note to tell him how you came across us and to make arrangements to best suit your time and budget:
generalmanager@flametreestate.com

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, writer, and hermit.

He was raised, with few concessions to modernity, in Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, and the Middle East.

He gained various degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

He launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online before running various homeless units at HarperCollins UK, India, and Hachette.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom divas and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers. The hotel is also the location for The Ceylon Press.

Besides running the Hotel and Press, he enjoys his hobbies of books, trees, dogs and, as a Cornishman, following the progress of the Cornish Independence Movement from afar.

Bianca C'Ffore, an expert on Sri Lankan fauna and flora, is also an accomplished opera singer, known to her admirers as The Milanese Nightingale. When not investigating the jungle around her, she spends her time taking care of the many needs of her capacious family.