

A CEYLON
PRESS TINY
GUIDE

A
CHECKLIST
OF THE 12
OWLS OF
SRI LANKA

OWLS



1

THE SRI LANKAN SPOT-BELLIED EAGLE OWL

The Sri Lankan Spot-bellied Eagle Owl has a sound as if a small infant is being murdered.

The owl 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. It is encountered in such places as Yala, Wilpattu, Sinharaja Kurunegala, Kandy and Galagedera. It has ashy white feathers picked out with dark highlights and horizontal ear tufts – which can be around 3 inches in length, making the bird's head appear as if it has a pair of assistant wings. Its diet consists of meat– from tiny rodents to civets, jackets, deer, and even monkeys. 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.

2

THE BROWN WOOD OWL

The Brown Wood Owl has a loud, distinctive cry, 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 more forceful in Indonesia. It is 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 is brown on top with wavy brown-white streaks on its belly.

3

THE BROWN FISH OWL

The Brown Fish Owl is common throughout south and southeast Asia. It is smaller and darker than its other fish owl cousins, about two feet in length and with an unremarkable white-brown plumage. 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.

4

THE SRI LANKA BAY OWL

The Sri Lanka Bay Owl is one of only two variants of this species recognised globally, one from India's Western Ghats, the other from Sri Lanka. Whilst scientists 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.

5

THE BROWN HAWK OWL

The Brown Hawk Owl is also known as the Brown Boobook. Little more than one foot in length, it has a gentle "ooo-ukkk, ooo-ukk" call. Of almost all the island's owl species, this one is 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.

6

THE BARN OWL

The Barn Owl is 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. It is 13 inches in length with an unmistakable white body and white disced face. It has an ear shattering shriek.

7

THE INDIAN SCOPS OWL

The Indian Scops Owl is little more than 10 inch long, living in a world that stretches from the Arabian desert to the Indian sub-continent. It has serious dark eyes crowned by a set of head tufts. 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.

8

THE ORIENTAL SCOPS-OWL

The Oriental Scops-Owl is marginally larger but otherwise so close in appearance to the Indian Scops Owl as make it all but impossible to 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.

9

THE SERENDIB SCOPS OWL

The Serendib Scops Owl is the most glamorous newcomer to Sri Lanka's owl scene, and one of the country's only two endemic owls. It is tiny - barely 7 inches in length. Squat, modestly brown in plumage and with a square head, it was only scientifically discovered in 2004 when research was completed 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.

10 THE CHESTNUT- BACKED OWLET

At 7.5 inches in length, the Chestnut-Backed Owllet is Sri Lanka's only other endemic owl. It has a round dark head, a solid little body, wings that are a chestnut brown, and its stomach clothed with white feathers flecked with brown. 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.

11 THE JUNGLE OWLET

The Jungle Owlet is found right across the Indian sub-continent. Squat, square, and small, its plumage is an all-round white and brown. Although most active at dawn and dusk, it can be seen through the day, often perching for prey for hours on end as it looks out for prey.

12

THE SHORT-EARED OWL

The Short-Eared Owl is 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 it is strikingly beautiful, with a layered and dark brown-to-white plumage and an abundance of tiny black feathers around each eye.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his 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.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, art and marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas 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 hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com. The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

ABOUT THE FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

"It's absolute paradise," wrote one guest recently; "I would fly back to Sri Lanka simply to stay in this place for a couple more days."

Centered on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel has been renovated and furnished with art & antiques; its healthy menus fusing street food with fine dining.

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.

Today its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa; rubber, coffee, vanilla; cinnamon, coconuts - and scores of trees from ebony to sapu – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Visit www.flametreeestate.com.

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