

Grim future for owls: Superstition, totems and black magic uses threaten owls in India

Owls are mostly nocturnal birds of prey that feed mainly on small mammals. Their plumage is soft and fluffy allowing them to fly silently. Owls live in a variety of habitats, ranging from deserts to forests, including human habitations. However, despite their ubiquity they are not easily seen. Owls are an essential part of the ecosystem. They feed on small mammals, birds, frogs, lizards and insects and are at the apex of the food chain.

In India, owls hold a significant place in Hindu mythology as they are the *vahana* of Goddess Durga. However, this has not dissuaded people from fearing owls and using them in superstitious rituals.

Owls found in India: The Indian subcontinent is home to 35 species of owls, of which 32 are found in India.

Population status: Unknown.

With virtually no systematic information available on their population status, there is little firm evidence as to what effect the current levels of illegal utilization may be having on owl populations.

Legal status:

- Forest Owlet is listed in Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.
- All other owl species of India are listed in Schedule IV of the Act, under the family names Tytonidae and Strigidae. The Act prohibits hunting and domestic trade in these species.
- The international trade in owls is regulated by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Forest Owlet is placed in Appendix I, which prohibits commercial international trade while all other owl species found in India are listed in Appendix II, thus restricting their international commercial trade.

INDIAN SPECIES:

Red font indicates species found in trade

Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*, Common Barn Owl *Tyto alba*, Rock Eagle-owl *Bubo bengalensis*, Jungle Owlet *Glaucidium radiatum*, Indian Scops-owl *Otus bakkamoena*, Brown Fish-owl *Ketupa zeylonensis*, Dusky Eagle-Owl *Bubo coromandus*, Mottled Wood-owl *Strix ocellata*, Asian Barred Owlet *Glaucidium cuculoides*, Collared Owlet *Glaucidium brodiei*, Brown Wood-owl *Strix leptogrammica*, Oriental Scops-owl *Otus sunia*, Eastern Grass-owl *Tyto longimembri*, Spot-bellied Eagle-owl *Bubo nipalensis*, Tawny Fish-owl *Ketupa flavipes*, Andaman Scops-owl *Otus balli*, Mountain Scops-owl *Otus spilocephalus*, Pallid Scops-owl *Otus brucei*, Nicobar Scops-owl *Otus alius*, Collared Scops-owl *Otus lettia* Eurasian Eagle-owl *Bubo bubo*, Buffy Fish-owl *Ketupa ketupu*, Himalayan Owl *Strix niviculum*, Little Owl *Athene noctua*, Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewitti*, Brown Boobook *Ninox scutulata*, Andaman Boobook *Ninox affinis*, Hume's Boobook *Ninox obscura*, Northern Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*, Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*, Oriental Bay-owl *Phodilus badius*, Sri Lanka Bay-owl *Phodilus assimilis*.

Threat: The main driver of the illegal owl trade in India is the use of owls in black magic and sorcery linked with superstition, totems and taboos. Shaman or black magic practitioners, frequently referred to as *tantriks*, prescribe the use of owl parts such as the skull, feathers, ear tufts, claws, heart, liver, kidney, blood, eyes, fat, beak, tears, eggshells, meat and bones for ceremonial *pujas* and rituals, often aimed at creating overnight wealth

The *tantrik* prescribes rituals to be performed using owl parts or involving live owl sacrifices on auspicious days such as the *amavasyas* (new moon night). Besides black magic, owls are also used for street performances, zoos, and folk medicines. Although, in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, owl meat is eaten by certain communities.

TRAFFIC's 2010 report, "*Imperilled Custodians of the Night*", on trade, trapping and utilization of owls in India revealed that more than a 1000 owls belonging to at least 13 species were recorded in illegal trade during the period 1992-2008. This number may be a conservative estimate as generally owls are not openly displayed or advertised for sale.

Of the 13 species in trade, the five most traded were:

Rank	Species	Scientific name
1	Rock Eagle-owl	<i>Bubo bengalensis</i>
2	Brown Fish-owl	<i>Ketupa zeylonensis</i>
3	Dusky Eagle-owl	<i>Bubo coromandus</i>
4	Indian Scops-owl	<i>Otus bakkamoena</i> *
5	Mottled Wood-owl	<i>Strix ocellata</i>

Global trade: There are some indications that owls are smuggled out of India mainly for the pet trade.

Trade hotspots and routes: In the order of highest to lowest: Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh/Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh/Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Gujarat/Uttarakhand – are the key States where owls are trapped.

The main owl trading centres in India are located in the States of Uttar Pradesh/Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal/Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Gujarat and Rajasthan/Bihar.

ACT NOW! STOP OWL POACHING AND TRADE.

- Lend your voice to create awareness about the plight of owls in India
- Do not buy products made from owl parts.
- Owls are not pets. Do not buy owls.
- If you encounter any poaching or trade, please report it to the nearest Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) office or Forest and Police department office.
- Take part in any campaigns conducted to save owls—support every effort to protect and conserve them.

END

Interesting facts about owls

- Owls cannot move their eyes within their sockets. This means they have to turn their head to see in a different direction.
- Not all owls can hoot. Owls make a wide variety of sounds, including hisses, screeches and screams.
- Not all owls are nocturnal. Some species, such as the Short-eared Owl, flies in the daytime.
- An owl has three eyelids: one for blinking, one for sleeping and one for keeping the eye clean and healthy.
- A group of owls is called a parliament, wisdom or study