in a bush. During this flight, a snapping sound is made either by wing or beak, but I was unable to record it. Most of these courtship flights were observed in July and August.

Call type II: This call is delivered when the nest has hatchlings. The male (?) selects a perch in the canopy or crown of a bush or tree to deliver this call. Exposed perches are avoided. As the observer approaches the nest, the bird becomes restless and increases the tempo of the call. I verbalise this call as a long-drawn *chuui-ek chuui-ek* (Fig. 1).

This vocalization seems to be an alarm call, but the precise function needs further study. This call allowed me to locate several nests (Table 2).

Call type III: I transcribe this as *pit pit pit* (Fig. 1). The male selects a high perch in the vicinity of the nest and delivers this call from an exposed branch. The bird appears restless while delivering the call. Like type II, this too appears to be an alarm call. On close observation, I noticed the following points.

1. When the female (?) approaches the nest with food, the male (?) starts calling.
2. When the female (?) is away and out of the male's (?) sight, the calling bird becomes silent.
3. The female (?) collects food from a certain area and uses a particular route to approach the nest. Male (?) select a high perch along this route.

Discussion

Several aspects of the ecology of these birds can be studied with the help of the calls they make. First, by basing censuses on the call type I, one can estimate the population size and density of territorial males. It should also be possible to measure the sizes of territories by mapping the singing locations of individual males. Second, one can use call types II and III to locate nests to estimate the density of active nests to study parental feeding behaviour, and to measure the success rate of broods.

Table 2: Nests found by locating individuals giving call type II.

Date	Notes on nest
15.viii.1997	With two chicks
25.viii.1997	With two chicks
15.x.1997	With two chicks
01.xi.1998	Female seen carrying larvae but nest remained untraced
24.viii.2002	One chick; almost fledged
29.ix.2002	Nest with three chicks
22.ix.2002	Female seen carrying larvae but nest remained untraced

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[**Editors' note**: Sound files of the three calls (MP3 format) have been uploaded on our website (www.indianbirds.in).]

Melanism in Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*

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Melanism is the occurrence of abnormally black coloured individuals due to the excess presence of a pigment called melanin in their skin, hair, feathers, etc. Colours of feathers in birds depend on combinations of the bichrome pigments such as melanin, porphyrin and carotinoids. Genetic, hormonal and environmental ultimately dictate their expression. In contrast to melanism, albinism is the total absence of pigment melanin from the feathers, eyes, and skin. Detection of the absence of a particular pigment is often not possible, the generalized terms leucism or isabelline are preferred. Reports of melanism in birds are rare and in nocturnal species are sparse. Pande et al. (2003) report partial melanism in the following Indian birds: Brahminy Starling *Sturnus pagodarum* and Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striatus* near Pune and Chiplun, Maharashtra, respectively.

A study of the population, ecology and breeding biology of the Spotted Owlet *Athene brama* was initiated near Pune, beginning from January 2002. During this study, the authors noticed a melanistic form of this owlet in the year 2003. The exact location of the nest hole where the melanistic owl was recorded was 18^{0}20'64"N, 74^{0}01'41"E at 800m near Saswad, Purandar taluk, Pune district, Maharashtra. The nest was in a 75-year old *Ficus bengalensis* tree, at a height of 8m, measuring 30x20cm with a depth of 45cm. In June 2003, four owlets were first seen near the nest, of which two were chicks and both were melanistic. One parent was of normal plumage and the other parent was partially melanistic. No photographs were taken at that time. The observations were however continued.

In February 2004, two adult spotted owlets of normal plumage occupied the same nest. Two chicks hatched from two eggs and both the chicks were of normal plumage. These chicks were ringed. Two, plastic, lemon yellow coloured rings with numbers 261 and 262 were placed in right and left tarsus respectively. In April 2004, the chicks fledged and subsequently the nest site was unoccupied. In July 2004, three owlets were again seen to be occupying the same nest. Two were adults and one was juvenile. One adult was normal and the other was partially melanistic but the juvenile was melanistic. Photographs were taken this time (Uploaded on www.indianbirds.in), and it was assumed that the pair that was seen in June 2003 had returned. This was a conjecture since ringing was not done earlier. It was also assumed that the pair nesting and fledging normal owlets from February until April 2004 was different from the pair that fledged a melanistic owlet, even though both the pairs used the same nest.

The distribution of Southern Spotted Owlet *A. b. brama* is confined to peninsular India south of 20^{0}N latitude and has not been reported from Sri Lanka. The Northern Spotted Owlet *A. b. indica* is seen north of this arbitrary line but overlap is seen around

20^{0}N latitude. The species is resident and affects ruins, old buildings, groves and ancient trees near human habitation and cropland. Southern race is about 21 cm. in length, is darker grey and slightly smaller than the northern race. The plumage differences between the normal (Ali and Ripley 1969, Grimmett et al. 1998) and melanistic plumages in the owlet that we recorded are shown in Table 1.

The irides of both were golden-yellow; however, it appeared that the eyes of the melanistic form were smaller.

Partially melanistic plumage of parent: One parent with this plumage was darker overall than the other, which had a normal plumage. There were black to dark brown coloured patches on the pale colored chest and abdomen, instead of brown streaks. The facial disc was dark with smoky eyebrows. White spots on the crown, mantle and wing coverts and the tail bars, though visible, were not very prominent.

We observed an interesting behavior in the melanistic owlet. When the nest tree was approached for observations and collecting pellets, the owlet with normal plumage first took wing, followed after closer approach by the partially melanistic parent, while the juvenile melanistic owlet only reluctantly flew away on even closer approach. It was often difficult to locate the melanistic owlet when it was perched and immobile. In our study of several nests of the spotted owlets with normal plumage in the same locality, the chicks and parents took wing almost simultaneously.

For obvious reasons, it is extremely difficult to identify melanism in nocturnal birds. True incidence of melanism in nocturnal birds is unknown. We report in this paper, probably the first instance of melanis, in wild population of any owl from India, in this case, in the Southern Spotted Owlet.

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Table 1: Normal and melanistic plumage

Normal plumage	Melanistic plumage
Plumage: grey brown.	Dark brown to black.
Facial disc and hind collar: white.	Dark, collar not seen.
Eyebrows: white, distinct.	Indistinct.
Crown, mantle, wing coverts: white spotted.	Indistinct white spotting.
Chest and belly: pale white with brown streaks.	Uniformly dark with indistinct bars.
Beak, feet and claws: grey.	Dark black.
Tail: conspicuously barred.	Bars indistinct.
Cere: smoky green.	Dark.

Recoveries from *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* – 7

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My pace has been too slow, and the Editor is right in suggesting that I write about the main happenings not on a monthly but on a yearly basis. My last contribution brought the story up to July 1961. This note covers the period up to December 1961.

The August 1961 issue carried extracts from a lecture by Salim Ali on "Birds and Plants", to the Singapore Branch of the Malayan Nature Society. It is a fascinating piece and I quote one paragraph which will be of interest not merely to ornithologists but also to our sportsmen.

"On the credit side of the bird's seed dispersal account, also, two significant entries may be cited. The flourishing sandalwood and oil industry of Southern India, which yields a substantial revenue to the State of Mysore, owes its existence largely to frugivorous birds like bulbuls and barbets which swallow the berries of the sandalwood tree (*Santalum album*) and disseminate the seeds far and wide, thus ensuring widespread natural regeneration of the tree. And such are the complex chains of cause and effect in Nature that one feels almost tempted to give vicarious credit to our native birds, at least in part, for India's supremacy in the sport of hockey. The links in this chain are as follows: The basis of the comparatively young but vigorous sports goods industry in the Punjab, which supplied all the championship-winning hockey sticks, is the mulberry tree (*Morus indica*). When the desert areas of the Punjab were first colonized by the introduction of the vast network of irrigation canals, the mulberry tree was planted along their banks as a fast-growing soil binder.

"The local birds took to the fruit with such zest that within a very short period the mulberry tree became abundant and paved the way for the flourishing plantations which furnish the raw materials for badminton and tennis rackets, cricket bats, hockey sticks and numerous sports requisites. The bird-assisted industry now not only caters for practically the entire needs of the country, but also earns a sizeable amount of much-needed foreign exchange by exports abroad."

"Some birds around Badrinath", in two parts, (Aug. 1961 and Oct. 1961, by K. S. Lavkumar) describes many of the common birds which visitors are certain to come across – white-capped redstarts, Plumbeous restarts, Himalayan whistling thrush, little Forktail, and the extraordinary brown dipper, which procures its meal by "plunging into the eddying water straight to the bottom; then if the water is clear it can be seen walking on the floor against the current…This suicidal feat of the little bird has always been rather alarming to watch…"

Among the land birds described is the wall creeper, "about the size of a large sparrow, with round full wings like a hoopoe and the same uncertain flight of a butterfly…but it is the habit of alighting and running up sheer walls that is diagnostic of the wall creeper, and it lives its perpendicular life on cliff faces above 14,000 ft…descending to the foothills in winter…"

No one can fail to be impressed by the