—*Postcard from The Netherlands*—
World Owl Conference-2007

Raju Kasambe & Pravin Charde

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Raju Kasambe, G-1, Laxmi Apartments, 64, Vidya Vihar Colony, Pratap Nagar, Nagpur 440022, Maharashtra, India. Email: *kasambe.raju@gmail.com*

Pravin Charde, Principal, Sevadal Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Umred Road, Nagpur, Maharashtra.

The World Owl Conference-2007: Owls, ambassadors for the protection of nature in their changing landscapes-was held at Groningen in The Netherlands from 31st October to 4th November 2007. It was truly a world conference as there were more than 100 participants representing over 40 countries. The conference had in all 87 oral presentations and 45 poster presentations.

31st October 2007: survey and monitoring workshop

There were presentations on methods and techniques of census, survey and monitoring of owl populations. This took us through various methods for estimation of accurate data on species abundance and status of owls. Arvind Ambudoss of India presented a paper on 'a method of census survey and monitoring of Eurasian Eagle-Owls in South India'.

1st November 2007: owl behaviour and owl fauna

The day started with a plenary by Iain R. Taylor on 'Do owls follow the rules?' After the plenary there were concurrent sessions on owl behaviour and owl fauna and eye specialists, Jan F. G. Worst and Hein Bloom, gave a presentation on 'The accommodation mechanism of owl's eye-a new theory on the muscular contribution to the reflective changes of the lens crystallina of the owl'.

We presented a paper on 'A study of the mounting behaviour of Spotted Owlets *Athene brama* in Maharashtra, India'.

Reuven Yosef and the senior author presented a paper entitled 'Anthropogenic activity aids in the habitat selection and survival of the critically endangered Forest Owlet *Athene blewitti*' [Ed: now *Heteroglaux blewitti*]. Arvind Ambudoss presented his paper on 'Prevalence of owl trapping communities and its ethnobiological significance in Tamil Nadu, South India.' Reuven Yosef presented another paper: 'Uluka (owl) in Sanskrit literature' on behalf of Suruchi Pande and Satish Pande as they could not attend the conference.

Presentations on vocalisations of Great Horned Owls *Bubo virginianus*, on aggressiveness in Ural Owls *Strix uralensis*, on the moult of Northern Hawk Owl *Surnia ulula*, mobbing of the Striped Owl *Asio clamator* and Barn Owl were all a learning experience. Al Vrezec presented a paper on the competitive exclusion and indirect interactions in the forest owl guild.

Then there were concurrent sessions on habitat selection and population trends and their causes. Arnold B. Van den Burg's presentation on 'Limitations of owl reproduction in the wild: is there a role food quality besides quantity?' was interesting. The success story of 'come back of the Barn Owl *Tyto alba* in northern Netherlands: population growth in relation to landscape features', by Johan de Jong was much appreciated.

A session on cultural significance of owls saw two presentations from India by Arvind Ambudoss and Reuven Yosef for Suruchi Pande and others. In the evening two films were shown. 'How Dutch owls behave' (by Eddy Kuis & Arnold van der Burg) and 'Owls in the mist' (by Clauss & Ingrid Konig).

2nd November 2007

The plenary by Erkki Korpmaki was on 'Responses of owls and kestrels to spatio-temporal variation of their main prey'. Norman Smith's presentation on the satellite tracking of Snowy Owls was an eye opener as it revealed the poaching of Snowy Owls besides the migration data.

There were presentations on video observations and population trends and their causes. The presentation by Ronald van Harxen on 'On-line registration of Little Owl *Athene noctua* breeding behaviour and food supply by means of volunteer effort' highlighted results of a first-of-its-kind web cam season of 5,500 hours of observations-proving the utility of volunteer effort, modern technology and Internet in research and conservation of owls. Sessions on biology, status and conservation of various owl species of the world were going on simultaneously. A demonstration on 'egg candling' by Peter Beersma was held. Meanwhile a stereo 3-D presentation by J. Worst and Hein Bloom on the morphology and functioning of the avian eye was presented.

A presentation by Hans Dieter Martens on, 'A wireless cavity nest viewing system and the evaluation of video clips', seemed highly practicable.

Three presentations on Ural Owls, 'Impact of blood parasites', 'Life history and reproductive success' and 'Nesting places are not a limiting factor' were applauded.

3rd November 2007: excursion and Dutch owl-day celebrations

It is really unbelievable that an owl-day is celebrated here, considering the superstitions owls face around the globe. But those who participated were happy to see how the importance of owls is being highlighted in European countries.

We went on an excursion to the small island of Schiermonnikoog (Shirmanikov), in the Wadden Sea. Sighting nearly 60 species of birds in a single day of birding was very rewarding and a lifetime experience.

4th November 2007

Geoff *et al* presented the plenary on 'The population dynamics, dispersal and conservation of the Canadian Burrowing Owl *Athene cunicularia*'.

The day saw one more presentation by Arvind Ambudoss on 'Anthropocentric pressure induced decline in status and distribution of Eurasian Eagle-Owls and initiation of participatory conservation measures-a case study in Tamil Nadu, South India'. Motti Charter and others' presentation on 'Nest box use by Barn Owls in a biological pest control program in the Beit She'an Valley, Israel' seems really suitable for India. The team had convinced Israeli farmers regarding the utility of Barn Owls-now the farmers spend money to install nest boxes on their farms, thus helping increase the population of the owls.

Conclusion

The World Owl Conference was a great event towards research and conservation of the Owls. However the meagre representation from the Indian Subcontinent, with as many as 32 species of owls, was saddening. Only three species of owls were 'represented' by Reuven Yosef, Arvind Ambudoss and the authors, though there were more abstracts.

The conference discussed the causes of decline but stressed on research and conservation using the latest technological advances to help owls survive. Reintroduction, use of nest boxes, public participation, radio-telemetry-were buzzwords.

The conference resulted into a decision to form a World Owl Working Group.

—*Gleanings*—

Edelaar, P. 2008. Rediscovery of a second kind of crossbill for the Himalayan region, and the hypothesis that ecological opportunity drives crossbill diversification. ***Ibis*** 150: 405-408.

Crossbills are known for their remarkably curved bills that cross each other when closed. These unique bills are adapted to pry open tough scales of conifer cones. The bill size and depth of each kind of crossbill (whether a distinct species or a subspecies) has apparently evolved in response to natural selection for foraging efficiently on a particular size and shape of cone. Worldwide, there are more crossbill species in areas of more conifer diversity, leading to the hypothesis that crossbill diversity is spurred by the diversity of conifer species.

However, in the Himalaya, there is only one crossbill, the Himalayan Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra himalayensis* that occurs all the way from Himachal Pradesh (India) eastwards through southwest China-a range where at least 11 conifer species suitable for crossbills are found. Why is there only one crossbill species in an area of such high conifer diversity? Is the hypothesis that conifer diversity drives crossbill diversity wrong or inadequate? Or are there other crossbill varieties or species in the Himalaya that we are as yet unaware of?

Pim Edelaar, an animal ecologist from Uppsala University in Sweden, investigated this conundrum. He borrowed and examined 39 crossbill specimens from various bird museums in the USA. These birds had been collected within the known range of the Himalayan Crossbill. His results, which revealed striking bimodality in the data, show two clearly separated groups of crossbills, one distinctly smaller than the other in terms of bill depth, length of upper mandible, and tail length. Thus, he uncovered two kinds of crossbills in the Himalaya.

He calls this a 'rediscovery of a second kind of crossbill' because the larger ones were discerned as distinct enough to be named separately as *L. c. bangsi* by Griscom way back in 1937. However, in 1941, Stanford and Mayr lumped both large and small forms as *L. c. himalayensis*, apparently because Mayr felt that his measurements (of what he *believed* to be Griscom's specimens) did not agree with Griscom's published data. They also felt that the sample size for the comparisons was inadequate. Now, more than half a century later, Edelaar's findings have vindicated Griscom's opinion that the larger ones are distinct enough to be given a separate subspecies status. It is possible that Mayr used the wrong set of specimens.

Edelaar argues that the difference in bill depth between the two groups is 'more than enough for strong ecological differentiation' considering that bill depth in five distinct kinds of North American crossbills on average differs only by 0.10 to 0.61 mm, whereas here it differed by a whopping 1.07 mm. Also, based on a review of conifer distribution data, Edelaar hypothesizes that the larger crossbill maybe specialising on the cones of the Chinese Larch *Larix potaninii*, and the smaller one may be similarly adapted to feed from