

Occurrence of the Forest Owllet *Heteroglaux blewitti* in Navsari and Valsad Districts of Gujarat, India

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The Forest Owllet *Heteroglaux blewitti* was rediscovered after 113 years, in 1997 (King & Rasmussen 1998). This rediscovery resulted in concerted Forest Owllet surveys, and further ecological studies on the species. These provided an encouraging perspective about the distribution, and ecology, of this endemic, and Critically Endangered species (BirdLife International 2017). In the 20 years after its rediscovery, the Forest Owllet has been reported from nine locations in eight districts of India (Mehta *et al.* 2015), including a recent sighting in Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary (Laad & Rohidas 2015). In addition to these, we present here two more sighting locations from two different districts of Gujarat (Fig. 1).

In November 2014, a pair of Forest Owlets was recorded in Dang District (Gujarat) (Patel *et al.* 2015). Subsequently, intensive studies have been carried out in the district, to understand the bird's distribution, and conservation needs. During this study, 82 individual birds have been recorded so far; 71.42% in teak *Tectona grandis* dominated agricultural landscape, 20.40% in degraded forest, 6.12% in riverine habitat, while only 2.04% was recorded in forest area (Patel *et al.* *in press*). Considering these recent findings, we carried out a five-day survey at 19 different locations in Valsad, and eight locations in Navsari Districts. All these survey sites are located in non-protected forests, and had not been surveyed earlier. All these locations were chosen on the basis of habitat and terrain similarity with the locations in the Dang District, where the Forest Owllet was known to occur.

At each location, we walked two kilometers from the main road, towards the agricultural farms, and at intervals of 500 m, we played the Forest Owllet's territorial call for one minute, and waited for five minutes. We repeated this process one more time before moving on to the next point.

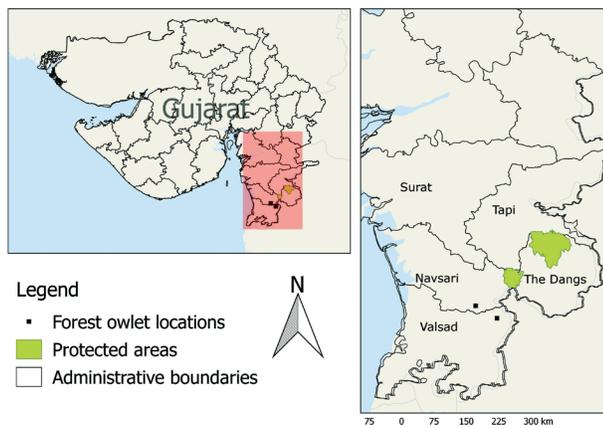


Fig. 1. New distribution records of Forest Owllet in Navsari District and Valsad District, Gujarat.



Figs. 2 & 3. Satellite image of forest owl sighting sites in Navsari District (top), and Valsad District (bottom) where red polygons are indicating human settlement, Blue blocks show Forest Owllet locations and yellow lines are indicating main roads. (Sourced from Google Earth).

Table 1. Parameters collected from Google Earth satellite images and field observations

Parameters	Navsari District	Valsad District
Habitat	Mahua dominated agricultural landscape	Teak dominated agricultural landscape
Terrain	Slightly undulating	Slightly undulating
Altitude (mts.)	133	244
Avg. aerial dist. from nearest human settlement (mts.)	319	78
Avg. aerial dist. from nearest main road (mts.)	498	320
Aerial dist. of nearest sighting record from Dang (km)	38.34	34.71
Distance from the nearest sea coast (km)	39.47	51.6
Number of local people working in proximity of 150 m. during the sighting	6	4

On 24 December 2016, at 1100 hrs, while conducting the survey on Vansda–Dharampur State Highway #5, a Forest Owlet responded to the territorial call near Anklach village (20.62°N, 73.27°E). The call was coming from a mahuva tree *Madhuca indica*. A local farmer, standing just beside that tree, helped us to spot it. Ten minutes later one bird flew out to another mahuva tree. We observed that individual for the next 45 min. During this period, it stayed hidden behind the leaves of the tree. This was a mahuva dominated agricultural landscape, as most of the teak trees were very young, and not taller than two to three meters (Table 1; Fig: 2). On the next day, we surveyed forest patches near Dharampur in Valsad District. At 1720 hrs, a Forest Owlet responded near Ganva village (20.55°N, 73.38°E) in a teak dominated agricultural landscape, similar to the Dang forest (Table 1; Fig: 3). The owlet was perched on a teak tree, behind huge leaves. As it was a winter evening, and the sun was getting low, and we could not make any further observations. At both locations, we asked people, who were working nearby, about this species. They identified the Forest Owlet by its call, and diurnal habits. The local name of the Forest Owlet is 'Dhudo', similar to that given by the tribes of Dang District. According to them, the Forest Owlet is fairly common and they often see it perched on trees on their farms; which is also a very common reply from people in the Dang forest (Patel *et al.* in press).

Conclusion

Our surveys confirmed the presence of Forest Owlets outside the Dang forest, which indicates that it may not be rare in Gujarat, as presumed. Further surveys, and detailed studies, are needed

in other locations with similar habitats. Our study suggests that Forest Owlets prefer to live near agriculture fields, but rely on small patches of nearby forest for roosting and nesting (pers. obs.). Our brief interactions with tribal communities embolden us to collaborate with them in future, for monitoring, and protecting the owlet.

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