

Sighting of the Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewitti* in Harsul, Nashik District, Maharashtra

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The forests of Harsul (20.11°N, 73.45°E), in Trimbak Taluka of Nashik District, Maharashtra, comprise tall tree species such as teak *Tectona grandis*, sadada *Terminilia tomentosa*, mahua *Madhuca indica*, mango *Mangifera indica*, *Bombax insignia*, pangara *Erythrina* species, among other trees, shrubs, and grasses. The Nature Conservation Society of Nashik, along with the forest department, has been conducting surveys of forest birds, in this area, for the past decade, besides advocating wildlife conservation in the surrounding villages of Waghera, Chinchwad, and Harsul—especially in discouraging the use of catapults to kill birds.



Pics: Bishwarup Raha

111 A, B. Forest Owlet (A) ventral view, (B) dorsal view.



Fig. 1. Distribution range of Forest Owlet in Nashik District.

Map: S. Subramanya

On 10 December 2016, we were following a flying Shikra *Accipiter badius* when we noticed an owlet perched on a mahua tree about 4–5 m above the ground, and preening itself. The time was 1000 hrs. The owlet did not appear to be disturbed by our presence. It looked different from a Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*. On closer observation we saw that its crown was grey-brown and lacked prominent spotting, its eyes were bright yellow, its neck and upper breast appeared dark brown, and abdomen and legs pure snowy white. Leafing through Manakadan *et al.* (2011), we found it matched the illustration of the Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewitti*. Photographs [111 A, B] of the bird were sent to Ranjit Mankadan, and Vibhu Prakash of the Bombay Natural History Society (*henceforth*, BNHS), who subsequently confirmed it as a Forest Owlet.

This is the first record of this Critically Endangered owlet from Nashik District. However, this is not unexpected, as Nashik lies within its known current range (Fig. 1), and the current site lies 90 km south-south-westward of Purna Wildlife Sanctuary (*henceforth*, WLS), Gujarat, and 65 km north-north-eastward of Tansa WLS, Maharashtra, almost in a straight line between these sites, and our record now fills this gap of 150 km. Though we have been involved in several bird surveys in this area, all of them were diurnal surveys in which aural playback was strictly not used in all these years – hence, a species like the Forest Owlet has eluded our observation.

We feel that using aural playback here could be detrimental to wildlife, as these gadgets are easily available, and local ethnic

communities may misuse them by luring birds with the played-back calls, and kill them with catapults.

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Status of Northern Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* at Harike, Punjab, India

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The Northern Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* is essentially a Palearctic bird. It has been recorded throughout the Punjab, and Sind, as a sparse and uncommon winter visitor (Roberts 1991). Ali & Ripley (1981) describe it variously as 'a vagrant, rare, and as locally not uncommon...'. It is mainly a winter visitor to parts of north-western India: Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Punjab (Grimmett *et al.* 1998), who also assign the 'rare' status to this owl in India. The Northern Long-eared Owl is 'a summer visitor' (Biddulph 1881), arriving early in March, and is common up to the middle of May in Gilgit (Scully 1881). Its breeding is reported from Baluchistan, Chitral, and western Kashmir, but confirmation is needed (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

While birding with Per Undeland, at Harike (31.17°N, 75.21°E), Punjab, ten Northern Long-eared Owls were found roosting in trees of *Acacia catechu* on 18 December 2015. They were roosting on different trees, spaced 10-15 m apart. These trees were part of a c. 150 x 150 m plantation of mixed trees surrounded by agricultural fields, and the owls were confined to the densest part of the plantation. They were very well hidden in the foliage, and flushed at close range. They rested during the day in the plantation and issued from it, to hunt, about sunset. On one side, beyond the fields, was the River Sutlej, with wide flood plains dotted with tussocks of sarpat grass *Saccharum* sp.. I had observed four birds on 08 March 1999 in a shisham *Delbergia sissoo* plantation, in Harike, along the Sutlej. At that time the trees were almost bare, and the birds were extraordinarily exposed. Contrary of the present observations, all the birds were then

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roosting on a single tree, at the edge of the plantation, where signs of tree cutting were evident. Although fresh leaves of spring had just started sprouting on some trees, they failed to conceal the owls (Sangha 2001). Those birds were extremely confiding. While constantly alert, they permitted photography from close quarters, and did not fly away. However, the birds observed on 18 December 2015 were very shy. When flushed by our approach they flew a short distance, and then suddenly alighted again. They were reluctant to leave the roosting site.

There have been prior reports of similar roosting congregations from this site, and the details are given in Table 1.

Considering the foregoing facts, these recent sightings of Northern Long-eared Owls at Harike, Punjab are not unexpected. Harike is well within the range of the species and the above records suggest that the birds are fairly regular during winter at Harike.

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Table 1: Roost congregations of Northern Long-eared Owl in Harike

Date	Count	Observer	Reference
23 March 1997	17	Per Undeland	Robson (1997)
7 February 1998	4	Per Undeland	Robson (1998)
2 February 1999	6	Ben King	Verbally, 2 February 1999
8 March 1999	4	Harkirat Sangha	Sangha (2001)
18 December 2015	10	Per Undeland & Harkirat Sangha	This work