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The Oriental Bay Owl *Phodilus badius* in Bhutan

The Oriental Bay Owl *Phodilus badius* is widely, but sparsely, distributed across South and South-east Asia (König et al. 2008; Bruce et al. 2019). The subspecies *P. badius saturatus* ranges in India from the foothills of Sikkim and then seemingly not again until south-eastern Arunachal Pradesh and the southern Assam Hills (Khasi Hills, eastern Meghalaya, and southwards to Lushai Hills) (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Several authors have disputed the presence of this species in Bhutan (Ali & Ripley 1983; König et al. 2009; Grimmett et al. 2019). Ripley (1982) and Ali et al. (1996) also stated that they were in doubt when they included Bhutan in its distributional range, for there did not seem to be any authenticated record of its occurrence there. They also remarked that from the distributional pattern alone, it would not be surprising if this species would occur in Bhutan. We have been unable to trace any specimens for Bhutan, nor published records or submissions to eBird. Furthermore, despite KDB undertaking 22 previous three to four weeklong birding trips across Bhutan, during spring, he too had not previously encountered this species anywhere in the kingdom.

The following account documents two independent records of the Oriental Bay Owl in Bhutan. These independent records were made only five months apart, and within approximately five kilometers of each other.

On 19 April 2012 at 2025 h whilst camped in a partially overgrown orchard just below the Zhemgang–Tingtibi road (27.19°N, 90.72°E), KDB heard (and very briefly saw) an Oriental Bay Owl that was calling nearby (<50 m away). The bird called persistently from a perch within the midstory and at the edge of Warm Broadleaf Forest, at 1,265 m asl. The owl was recorded on the south-eastward-facing slope of the inner range of the Bhutan Himalaya, along the steep sided valley of the Dakpai Chu (Chu=River).

The vocalisations were recorded with a Sony TCM 5000-EV cassette tape-recorder (Saul Mineroff modified version) and a Sennheiser ME 66 microphone. The cassette recording was digitized (using Audacity software) and Macaulay Library generated a sonogram (Fig. 1).

The recording comprises around 90 sec, consisting of several series of three to four musical, high-pitched, and rising and falling whistled notes with a distinctive bleating, whimsical quality, with each note tapering off and descending towards the end. Each phrase was repeated at intervals of approximately ten seconds. The beautiful, mellifluous song is very distinctive and similar to songs of Oriental Bay Owl that KDB had also heard and recorded in Sabah, Borneo (Malaysia), and Thailand and resembled songs recorded in Java and Sumatra (Indonesia).

On 11 September 2012 at 1215 h TD (a senior forest ranger in the Royal Bhutan Department of Forests and Park Services), was carrying out a cable-line survey for timber extraction in the Kikhar village (27.21°E, 90.76°N) area of Zhemgang Dzongkhag). Always alert to the presence of birds, he was amazed to locate an Oriental Bay Owl perched midway up a large broad-leaved tree. The bird was sleeping and permitted TD to obtain three images, one of which is included here [215]. The location was at c. 1700 m asl in Cool Broadleaved Woodland.



215. Oriental Bay Owl near Kikhar village, Zhemgang Dzongkhag 11 September 2012.

Tashi Dhendup

These records appear to be the first documented records of Oriental Bay Owl for Bhutan, although the species has been recorded in adjacent regions, further southwards and eastwards in India (Fig. 2) where it is regarded as a rare resident of the Duars and foothills, locally up to 1,500 m (Ali 1977), neighboring Arunachal Pradesh, and West Bengal (see elsewhere in this issue) (Datta 2004).

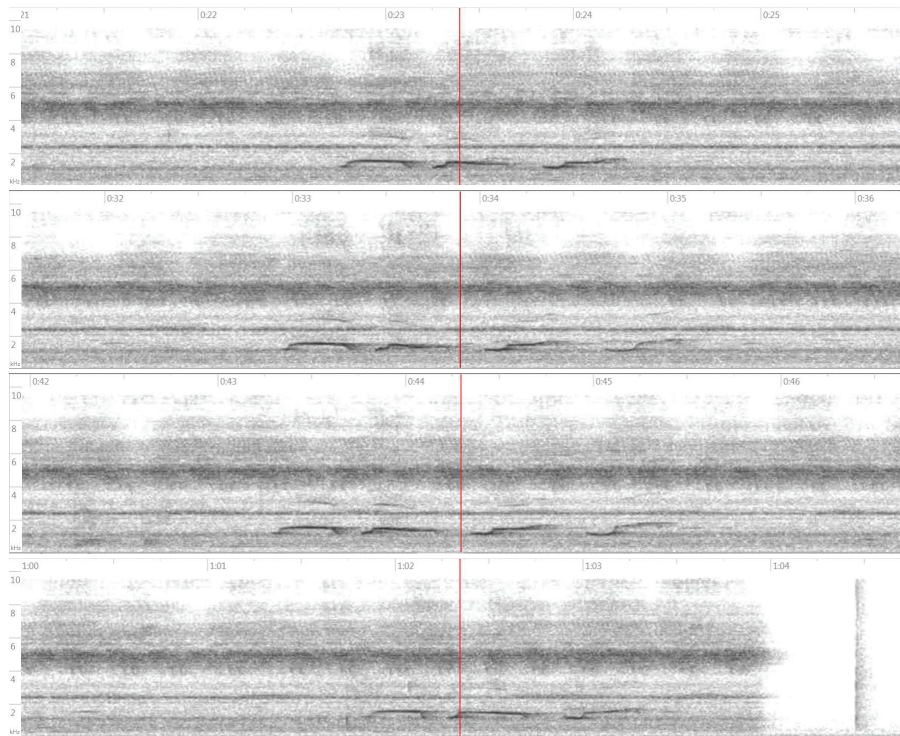


Fig. 1. Sonogram of Oriental Bay Owl vocalization (elapsed time in seconds is shown along the top of each section). Four sections of the same recording, showing calls starting at 23 s, 33 s, 43 s, and 62 s. Digitized version of cassette recording by KDB available via eBird checklist (Bishop 2012) (<https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/187155071>)

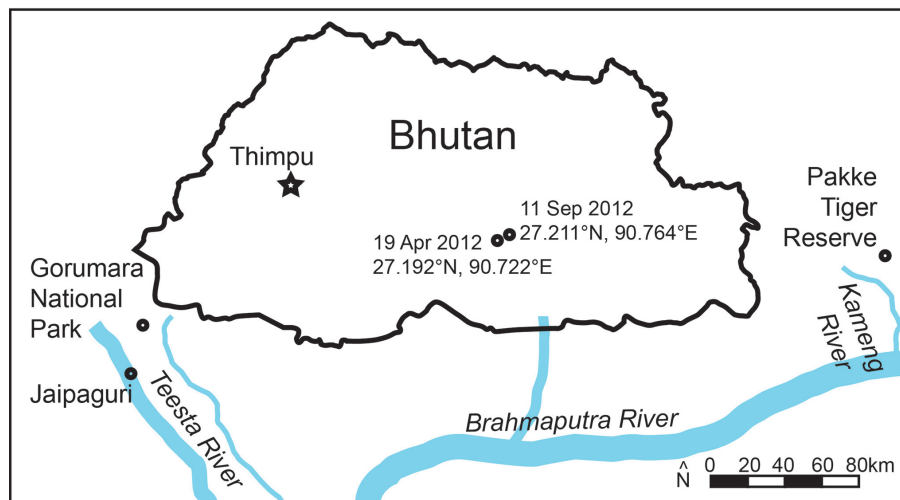


Fig. 2. Map showing the location of the Bhutan observation, as well as adjoining records in India.

The paucity of both, modern (per eBird), and older records (Ali 1977; Choudhury 2000) of the Oriental Bay Owl from north-eastern India suggests that this species is genuinely rare in this part of the Indian Subcontinent. In part this rarity may reflect the difficulty of access to suitable habitat due to the dangers of the presence of large mammals and possibly recent political unrest. Nevertheless, the distinctiveness of this species' vocalisation should make it readily detectable (as was KDB's experience) from safe havens within appropriate habitat. Given this species' distribution in north-eastern India it is not surprising that it occurs in Bhutan, as suggested by Ripley (1982), and Ali et al. (1996).

The observation of this species in Bhutan, described here, certainly completes an important gap in its known range. It will now be interesting to learn what this species' status is, both in Bhutan, and the neighboring part of India.

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