

The Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* in Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctuary, Churu District, Rajasthan

The status of the Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* in the Indian Subcontinent is described variously as 'scarce' or 'rare' and apparently 'erratic' (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012: 249; Roberts 1991: 489). It is even 'fairly plentiful' in some years (Ali & Ripley 1981: 313). The species is a winter visitor to much of Pakistan, Kashmir to north-western India, rarely reaching western Uttarakhand, the Delhi area, and Nepal through Bhutan (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Tiwari & Kumar (2020) have listed records of the species from India and provided status of the species in Haryana, Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Gujarat, Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal. The only breeding records of the species are from Gurias, Kashmir (Shelley 1895), and recently from Leh, Ladakh (Stanba 2022).

Recently, the species was spotted regularly at Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctuary (28.45°N, 73.78°E), Churu District, from early February to mid-April 2022. It was first sighted at Tal Chhapar on 6 February 2022 by UB. On the morning of 9 February 2022 an owl was flushed by a group of photographers (Sangha 2022). As the bird flew away towards the open area across the boundary of the sanctuary it afforded not only excellent views through field glasses, but also ample opportunity to Gaurav Bhatnagar to take its flight shots [184, 185]. Soon enough, four more birds were observed roosting in *Prosopis juliflora* thickets growing along the barbed-wire fencing on the boundary of the sanctuary. In the afternoon GSB also photographed the birds and posted these on eBird (Bhardwaj 2022). The birds, numbering five, were regularly sighted during three months or so at Tal Chhapar, and were observed by a number of people. UB saw three birds for the last time in the sanctuary on 16 April 2022.



184. Long-eared Owl in flight at Tal Chhapar, 9 February 2022.



185. Long-eared Owl at Tal Chhapar, 9 February 2022.

Both: Gaurav Bhatnagar

The recent literature on the species has not recorded it from Rajasthan (Tiwari & Kumar 2020). However, prior sightings from the state, other than these from Tal Chhapar do exist. strong rufous-orange spots in primaries, no white on trailing edge of secondaries' was twice flushed from *Acacia cineraria* tree at Khuri (26.75°N, 70.78°E), near Jaisalmer on 1 December 2000 (Suter 2000). Four birds were observed on 25 November 2020 near Rajgarh (Bubo Birding 2020), and five birds on 13 December 2002 at Dokwa (28.576° N, 75.326°E) near Rajgarh in Churu District (Saini 2020). These sightings were 19 days apart, and may have well comprised members of the same parliament of owls sighted less than nine kilometres from each other). Moreover, it has been reported in "good numbers" in *Salvadora* dominated scrub near Rajgarh, Churu District, between October and February in 2019 and 2020. In November 2019 c.20 birds were reported from the area (*pers. comm.*, S. S. Poonia.).

Broadly speaking, the habitat of all locations where the species has been recorded in Rajasthan is xeric and psammophytic, with species of the following genera prevalent: *Acacia*, *Prosopis*, *Zyzyphus*, *Salvadora*, *Capparis*, *Calotropis*, *Haloxylon*, *Calligonum*, *Lasiurus*, etc. In this habitat the vegetation is quite sparse with open grassland or barren land interspersed with scattered trees and thorny bushes. For the overwintering owls the *Prosopis* thickets along the boundary of Tal Chhapar Sanctuary, and the scattered *Acacia cineraria* trees both in the sanctuary and outside, provide perfect shelter for concealment and perhaps thermal during the day.

The sighting of five Long-eared Owls at Tal Chhapar, and other sites in Rajasthan, is not surprising. The species is 'a nomadic bird wandering wherever and whenever it needs to' (Voous 1988: 258–260). When heavy snow covers their habitat in winter, the northern populations migrate up to 4,000 km (Duncan 2003) to areas with more favourable winter climates. The birds from central Asia are known to winter south to Egypt, Pakistan, northern India and southern China (König et al. 1999; König & Weick 2008). In winter it migrates down into the plains and has been recorded throughout Sind, Kachchh, and Punjab in Pakistan (Roberts 1991), bordering Rajasthan. A single bird was recently recorded on 21 March 2022 at Yazman, (28.49°N, 70.99°E) Punjab, Pakistan (Motteau 2022) not far from the Rajasthan border. Moreover, Walter N. Koelz collected specimens of the Long-eared Owl from Sirsa, Haryana in February 1933 (UMMZ Birds Collection 2022). A male, on 20 March 1861, and a female on 4 February 1879 were collected in Gurgaon; the former by A. O. Hume. Four males and three females were collected from Urni Walla (=Arniwala, Sirsa District) in 1869–1871 (NHMUK). The straight line distance between Tal Chhapar and the above locations is hardly 250 km. Seemingly, the species has been overlooked in the past and the above records from the north-western Rajasthan indicate that the species winters, at least sporadically, in the state.

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The Red-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe chrysopygia* in Punjab, India

While birdwatching on 27 February 2022, near a village called Chappar Chiri Khurd (30.70°N, 76.66°E) in Mohali District, Punjab, India, I saw a bird of the *Oenanthe* sp. It was mostly plain brown-grey above and grey-white below. I took a few photographs, which didn't turn out to be good owing to the harsh light of early afternoon. Initially it was identified as an Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* due to its plain brown appearance. However, after processing the photographs, the light rufous-orange rump and rusty tail tips were noticed.

In order to ascertain the identity of the bird, the same site was visited again on the morning of 7 March 2022. The bird was found at the same spot again. The rufous-orange rump and tail tips were clearly observed. The rufous buff tinge was extending variably to flanks and belly. Also, the bird had a warm buff-brown

tone on its ear-coverts and a greyer cast on the sides of its neck. A blackish eye-stripe, mostly pronounced on lores, and poorly defined greyish-white supercilium were also observed. Matching the photographs with published work, it was identified as a Red-tailed Wheatear *O. chrysopygia* (also known as the Persian Wheatear after being split from *O. xanthopyrma*). The Red-tailed Wheatears that visit north-western India in winter are Persian Wheatears, and breed in Baluchistan (Grimmett et al. 2011; Shirihai & Svensson 2018).



186. Red-tailed Wheatear at Chappar Chiri Khurd, Punjab, 27 February 2022.



187. Red-tailed Wheatear displaying rufous-orange rump and tail tips.

Both: Rajive Das

Previous Indian records are mostly from the states of Rajasthan and Gujarat (eBird 2022). Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) have presumptively mapped a part of the Punjab in their distribution maps, but no definitive reports to back this could be found. It has been reported from the adjoining states/UTs of Jammu & Kashmir (eBird 2022), Himachal Pradesh (Grimmett et al. 2011), Delhi NCR (Mehta & Dogra 2018; Harvey & Vyas 2018), and as close as the adjoining UT of Chandigarh (Singh 2005). The bird is not listed in the BNHS Envis (2022) Punjab list. Apart from a recent sight report from Ayali Khurd in Ludhiana District, Punjab on 14 October 2020 (Saggar 2020), of which no further details are available, there are no other records of this species from the state. Notwithstanding that it has occurred all around the state, this would be the first evidence of the bird's presence in the Punjab.