

The range of the Brown Hawk Owl *Ninox scutulata* in northern India—an update

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With 32 species, *Ninox* is one of the most diverse genera among owls; it comes only after *Otus* (Winkler et al. 2021). The Brown Hawk Owl *Ninox scutulata*, also known as Brown Boobook, is the only *Ninox* owl found in mainland India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It is widely distributed and is found from the Indian Subcontinent to southern China, and through Indochina, the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, the Malay Peninsula and Palawan (south-western Philippines), to northern Natuna Islands, the Riau Archipelago, Bangka, Borneo, Sumatra, and western Java (Olsen et al. 2020). There has been significant taxonomic reshuffling in this genus, and currently it consists of nine subspecies. The individuals seen in northern India belong to *N. s. lugubris* (König & Weick 2008; Olsen et al. 2020).

In this note we discuss our records of the Brown Hawk Owl from Himachal Pradesh and the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir (*hereinafter*, Jammu & Kashmir), and also discuss briefly the records from other states and union territories in northern India: the Union Territory of Chandigarh (*hereinafter*, Chandigarh), Haryana, and the National Capital Region (*hereinafter*, NCR). These records are from places outside the range given in recent works, which is till Uttarakhand. There have been no records from the Union Territory of Ladakh. Most of our records of the Brown Hawk Owl occurred during spring, mainly from late February to April. It is the breeding season of the species in northern India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) and the owl is most vocal during this time of the year. The song of the Brown Hawk Owl is a repeated, resonant, and rising, disyllabic hoot, “*whoo-wup, whoo-wup, whoo-wup*” (Olsen et al. 2020). It is loud and unmistakable, making it easy to detect the species.

Jammu & Kashmir

The Brown Hawk Owl has been reported from two different locations in Jammu & Kashmir.

- On 12 November 2019, PK visited Jourian (c. 20 km from Akhnoor, Jammu District; 32.81°N, 74.59°E; c. 300 m asl) along with Pankaj Chibber, Ajay Kumar, Sachin Bhagat, and Sudesh Kumar (Painted Stork 2019). A Brown Hawk Owl was photographed [26] sitting on a Eucalyptus tree. The habitat had sparse tree cover near village fields, in a low-lying area of the Chenab Basin. This was the first confirmed record of a Brown Hawk Owl from Jammu & Kashmir. PK and Pankaj Chibber recorded it again at the same location on 9 February 2020 (Chibber 2020).



26. Brown Hawk Owl at Akhnoor, Jammu, on 12 November 2019.

Parmil Kumar

- On the night of 13 March 2021, PK and Pankaj Chibber heard a Brown Hawk Owl on the periphery of Mansar Lake, Udhampur District (32.69°N, 75.15°E; c. 660 m asl) (Chibber 2021). After some scanning it was located and photographed. It was seen close to a village, situated near the water.

Himachal Pradesh

- Dharamsala, Kangra District:** On 25 March 2017, Bhatia (2017) heard the distinctive call of a Brown Hawk Owl near the Police Ground, within Dharamsala town (32.20°N, 76.32°E; c. 1,210 m asl). The area is moderately populated and has scattered trees among buildings. VG heard the call

again, at same location, on 12 May 2019.

On 10 March 2019, VG recorded a call at his house at Chilgari, Dharamsala (32.21°N, 76.32°E; c.1,240 m), and c. 500 m from the Police Ground. VG sent that recording to CA who identified it as the call of a Brown Hawk Owl. On 21 March 2019, CA and VG recorded four individuals after dusk, within 300 m of each other, at the same location. They were calling loudly from different trees. CA also photographed a mating pair [27]. This area had scattered broadleaf and pine trees and a thick understory along a small stream. Though it was sandwiched between two human habitations, this patch was connected to the Sarah Forest, an 'Important Birding Area' (Rahmani et al. 2016). During the day, they remained hidden in dense vegetation and were rarely seen [28]. A Brown Hawk Owl was heard, almost daily, at Chilgari in March and April 2019, but only rarely after that. On 3 April 2019, two Brown Hawk Owls were heard at tea gardens (32.21°N, 76.30°E), one km from this location. On 16 April, CA and VG surveyed the Chilgari–Kunal Pathri Temple Road, and heard/saw five individuals in the next one-and-a-half kilometer at different points. At Chilgari, the Brown Hawk Owl was also recorded in winter, on 25 December 2019. During the next three years we recorded the species on several occasions, in both, summer and winter, at the above-mentioned locations and the locations adjacent to these areas. VG recorded the Brown Hawk Owl at Sidhpur, Dharamsala (32.19°N, 76.35°E) on multiple occasions in March 2021. Near his house in Charan Khadd, Dharamsala (32.21°N, 76.33°E; c. 1200 m asl), PD recorded this owl during three consecutive spring seasons between 2021 and 2023.



Both: C. Abhinav

27. Mating of Brown Hawk Owl at Dharamsala on 21 March 2019.



28. Brown Hawk Owl at Dharamsala on 3 April 2019.

- **Col. Sher Jung National Park, Sirmaur District** (erstwhile Simbalbara National Park): CA and PD visited the National Park on 6 April 2019 and heard the call of two Brown Hawk Owls at entry gate of National Park (30.46°N, 77.56°E; c. 430 m asl). CA and PD stayed at the Forest Rest House inside the National Park (30.42°N, 77.48°E), where calls of three to four individuals were heard simultaneously from different directions at night. Next day, to check its abundance, they played back its call along one kilometer of the road from the Forest Rest House. Five individuals responded to the playback, within a stretch of 300 m, indicating that it is not uncommon in this National Park. The Brown Hawk Owl has also been recorded at different locations in this park, by various other observers (eBird 2023). Bhargav et al. (2007) also reported the species during their study of the avifauna of this National Park. Records from Himachal Pradesh (Fig. 1) have been mentioned in Table 1.

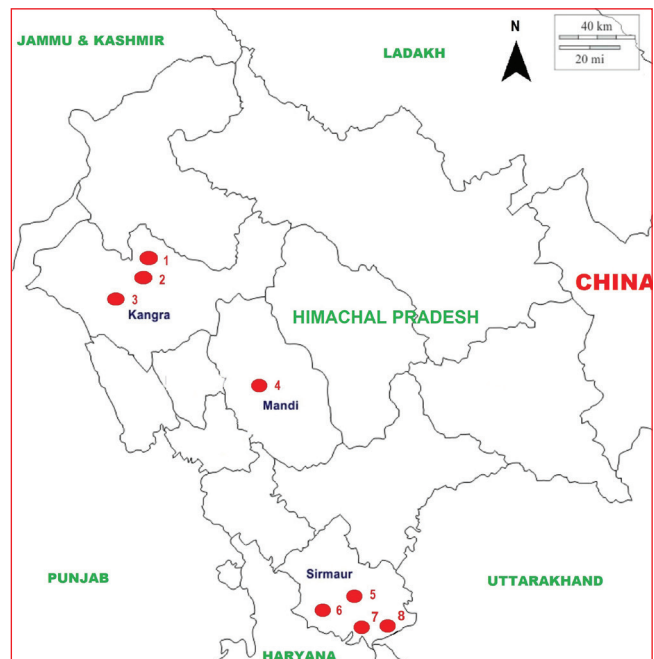


Fig. 1. Map of records of Brown Hawk Owl in Himachal Pradesh. Red dots- records. 1- Dharamsala, 2- Kangra, 3- Nagrota Surian, 4- Mandi, 5- Renuka Ji, 6- Nahan, 7- Col. Sher Jung National Park, 8- Paonta Sahib. [DISCLAIMER: The external boundaries of India, as depicted here, may not be accurate and are not authenticated by the Government of India.]

Table 1. Records from Himachal Pradesh

District	Location	Date	Observer	Comments	Reference
Sirmaur	Col. Sher Jung National Park	Multiple records	CA, PD, Ankit Vikrant	As described above	Bhargav et al. (2007)
	Near Villa Round, Nahan (30.56°N, 77.30°E; c. 930 m asl),	February to May in 2016 and 2018	Ankit Vikrant	Regularly recorded upto four individuals	Ankit Vikrant <i>pers comm.</i> Dated 3 September 2020
	Renuka Ji (30.61°N, 77.45°E; c. 660 m asl)	2018 to 2022	Virender Sharma	Regularly recorded during the past five years mainly during March	Virender Sharma <i>pers comm.</i> Dated 23 December 2022
	Paonta Sahib (30.45°N, 77.61°E; c. 400 m asl)		Various observers		eBird (2023)
Mandi	S.L.B.S. Government Medical College and Hospital complex, Ner Chowk (31.61°N, 76.92°E; c. 780 m asl)	19 March 2020	CA	Heard the distinct call from a grove, surrounded by buildings	
	-do-	28 October 2021	Tarun Goel	Photographed while sitting on streetlight	
Kangra	Dharamsala	Multiple dates	CA, PD, VG, Garima Bhatia	As described above	
	Saknara village, near Nagrota Surian (32.05°N, 76.07°E; c. 430 m asl)	7 March 2017	Santosh Thakur	Photographed near the entry gate of the sanctuary	Thakur (2017)
	Forest Rest House, near Nagrota Surian (32.05°N, 76.09°E; c. 510 m asl)	undated	Devinder Singh Dhadwal	The Rest House is surrounded by a hill forest	Dhadwal & Kanwar (2018)
	Ghurkari, near Kangra (32.13°N, 76.29°E; c. 760 m asl)	30 April 2020, April 2022 and March 2023	CA	It was heard on multiple occasions around CA's house which is surrounded by village fields with scattered trees and houses	

The Brown Hawk Owl has also been recorded from other states / Union Territories in northern India (Fig. 2).

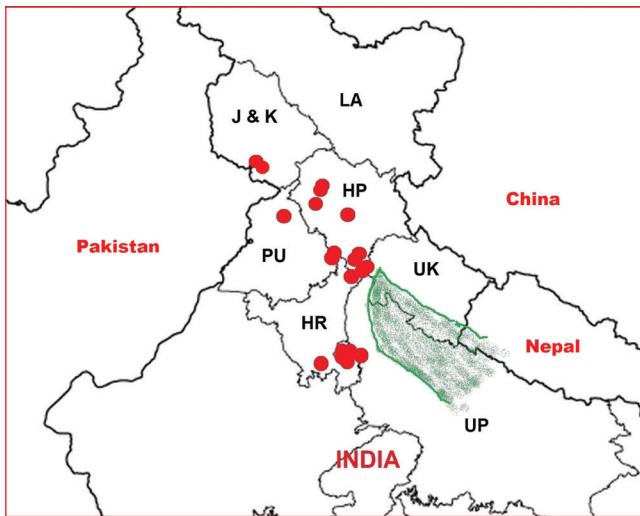


Fig. 2. Map of records of Brown Hawk Owl in northern India. Red dots- records, Green band-north-western end of distribution range, as given by Grimmett *et al.* 2011. HP=Himachal Pradesh, HR=Haryana, J&K=Jammu & Kashmir, LA=Ladakh, PU=Punjab, UK=Uttarakhand, and UP=Uttar Pradesh. (Records from UK and UP, outside the depicted distribution range, and from Rajasthan are not shown here.) [DISCLAIMER: The external boundaries of India, as depicted here, may not be accurate and are not authenticated by the Government of India.]

Punjab

There is a specimen of the Brown Hawk Owl from Jalalpur, Hoshiarpur District, dated 16 January 1892 (Wright 1892).

Chandigarh

Chandigarh is in the Indo-Gangetic Plain of northern India, not too far from Sirmaur District of Himachal Pradesh. The Brown Hawk Owl has been reported and photographed post 2016,

from multiple locations in the city, including the Botanical Garden, Punjab University campus (Cheema 2016), DAV College (MCM DAV Zoology 2021), and Lake Reserve Forest near Sukhna Lake (Bansal 2020).

Haryana

Haryana and Delhi are also located in the Indo-Gangetic Plain of northern India.

- Kalesar National Park and Kalesar Sanctuary are situated in northern Haryana and are adjacent to Col. Sher Jung National Park. The Brown Hawk Owl has been recorded on multiple occasions in this region (Bamby 2018; Ahlawat 2019).
- A Brown Hawk Owl was reported on 31 March 2020 from Pinjore, Panchkula District, Haryana, which is situated between Chandigarh and Himachal Pradesh (Singh 2020).

National Capital Region

The Brown Hawk Owl was not reported from the Delhi area before 2012; However, there have been several recent records, based on which Vyas (2019) has listed the Brown Hawk Owl as a rare resident in this region.

Discussion

In the Indian Subcontinent, the Brown Hawk Owl is a resident in the Himalayan foothills from Uttarakhand, east to Arunachal Pradesh, North-east India, Bangladesh, through most of the Western and Eastern Ghats, to Sri Lanka and the Nicobar Islands (Grimmett et al. 1998; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It is locally common in wooded areas, including around human habitation, from the plains to about 1,700 m (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Ali & Ripley (1987), while describing the range of the species, mentioned that it was widely, but locally, distributed through northern and central India, excepting the arid tracts in the north-

west (Rajasthan, northern Gujarat). However, the distribution maps in Grimmett et al. (1998, 2011), Kazmierczak (2000), and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) show a much-restricted range in northern India. All of them have shown its range in the Himalayan foothills and adjacent plains, only till Uttarakhand in the west, with no records shown in Jammu & Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Delhi, or Haryana. The locality of one specimen of a female Brown Hawk Owl, dated 18 June 1936, is mentioned as Jurnat (=Yurnath; 3,100 m asl), Lahaul, Himachal Pradesh (Anonymous 1936 a, b). However, this is probably a missing specimen of the juvenile Boreal Owl, *Aegolius funereus* based on the date, location, and age of the specimen. As per Rasmussen & Anderton (2012: 247) three specimens of Boreal Owl are known from India, an adult, a juvenile, and a mummified adult, all from Lahaul. However, Vertnet shows only two specimens (Vertnet 2023). Vaurie (1960: 12) also listed three specimens, and mentioned, 'A third specimen of *juniperi*, a very young bird "taken at Jurnat, Lahul [=Lahaul], on June 23, 1936," has been lost or misplaced, as it cannot be found in the Koelz collections.' Koelz (1939: 80) mentioned that two specimens of Boreal Owl, a female and juvenile, were taken on 18 June and 23 June 1936. The third one was from 1951 (Vaurie 1960: 12). To confirm this, mails were sent to first author of Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) and to FMNH, which went unanswered. Moreover, Lahaul is a remote high-altitude valley, receiving heavy snowfall in winter and Brown Hawk Owl is usually found below 1,700 m.

The Brown Hawk Owl has been recorded regularly in Sirmaur District, from various localities, and is fairly common. This is not unexpected as the district shares its boundary with Uttarakhand, and this owl is a common resident in Dehradun Valley, the western-most region of Uttarakhand (Singh 2000). Chandigarh and Delhi are also not too far from the distribution range of the species, which has been shown in recent prominent works. However, the records from Jammu, and Dharamsala are surprising, as Dharamsala is c. 210 km west of the known distribution range of the species, and Akhnoor, Jammu, is a farther c. 170 km north-westwards of Dharamsala and c. 380 km north-westwards from the known distribution range of the species. The records from Akhnoor are the first records for Jammu & Kashmir (Grimmett et al. 2011). The Brown Hawk Owl is largely a sedentary species (Olsen et al. 2020; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Thus, it could also be a resident even at those locations where it has been found only during one season. We have been documenting the Brown Hawk Owl in both, summer and winter at Dharamsala for the past four years and have witnessed birds mating. Probably there is a small resident population around Dharamsala. Apart from the above-mentioned records of Brown Hawk Owl from Himachal Pradesh, there have been no previous record of the species from the state. It was not reported from the Pong Lake area earlier (den Besten 2004; Dhadwal 2011). Dharamsala has been well explored by several ornithologists, notably Hingston (1921), Whistler (1926a, b), and den Besten (2004), and 15 owl species have been reported from Kangra District. However, the Brown Hawk Owl was not recorded in this district. Similarly, the species was not reported from Jammu, Chandigarh, and Delhi, until recently. This is quite surprising as a resident population of an owl with distinct and loud call, which lives near habitation, is difficult to miss. Delhi and its surrounding regions have a long history of being birded. One could suspect a range extension by the species; however, outside its known distribution range, it

seems that the Brown Hawk Owl is present in low numbers and is very local. Besides, there has been an exponential increase in birders' coverage of the country in the past decade. This might be the reason that the species has been detected from these regions only recently. Moreover, eBird (2023) shows many recent records of the Brown Hawk Owl from north-western India, Madhya Pradesh, and eastern Maharashtra in central India, which are also outside the range recorded in recent works. In Rajasthan, it is frequently recorded from Bharatpur, mainly during winters, and has been reported from Mt. Abu in the past (Ali & Ripley 1987; eBird 2023). In Gujarat, it is an uncommon/rare resident in the forests of southern Gujarat and has also been recorded from Gir National Park and Thol Bird Sanctuary (Ganpule 2016). These records of the Brown Hawk Owl, outside the range given in recent works, consolidate the earlier view of a much more extensive range of this species, given by Ali & Ripley (1987). Birders should look for this species in northern India, including further north of Jammu, to learn about its abundance and true distribution.

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Correspondence

Site fidelity in a Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris* from the Gulf of Kachchh, western India

The Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris* (Horsfield 1821) is an iconic species among waders, and a study of its migration patterns has provided an increase in the knowledge of waders of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway (Lisovski et al. 2016). The species also migrates across the Central Asian Flyway and is amongst the top twenty priority species for India (Anon 2018). They breed in North-East Siberia, Russia (Tomkovich 1996) and its non-breeding range extends along the coastline of SE Asia to the coasts of Australia and westwards to India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and up to the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula (Gils et al. 2020, Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). This correspondence focuses on a colour-marked individual that has been recorded over three years in Kachchh, Gujarat during the non-breeding period.

Balachadi (22.58°N 70.19°E) is a coastal village of the Jamnagar district situated on the southern coast of Gulf of Kachchh of Gujarat state of India. The intertidal area was visited on 06 October 2019 by Yashodhan Bhatia (YB) and Ashish Pankhania (AP) and a tagged Great Knot [29] as photographed amongst 20 Great Knots. There were two leg flags on the left tibia, a black flag without any number was over a yellow band which had ‘6Z’ engraved on it in black. A metal ring on the right tibia was also visible.

Dr. Dmitry Dorofeev (Senior Researcher, All-Russian Research Institute of Nature) informed us that he had tagged this individual (6Z) in Kamchatka in far Eastern Russia on 17 July 2019 as an adult; caught on its roost with a special trap locally known



29. Great Knot 6Z was first photographed on 06 October 2019 (note active wing moult in all individuals).

as ‘taynik’ (Dmitry Dorofeev *verbally*). Later, after molecular analysis, ‘6Z’ was confirmed to be a female. This bird travelled approximately 7,700 km to reach Balachadi (Fig. 1).

In subsequent visits, the bird was observed and photographed roosting and foraging along with other waders, terns, and gulls. Observations of 6Z were made in flocks of Great Knots ranging between 10 to over 400 individuals. Such observations, provided by birders and photographers visiting the area, are summarized in Table 1. These re-sightings indicate that this particular individual spent the entire non-breeding (winter) period of 2019–20, 2020–21, and 2021–22 in this area.

In 2020, we visited the site till 20 March 2020 before the COVID-19-related lockdown was imposed in India. Further