

An Oriental Scops Owl *Otus sunia* from Punjab

On 17 July 2022, this author received a video from an acquaintance, which contained footage of a bird he wanted me to identify at the Animal's Care Association, Rajpura (30.48°N, 76.59°E, c. 259 m asl), Patiala District, Punjab, India. It had been found on the roof of a house and was unable to fly due to an injured wing. The owner of the house contacted the said Association, who brought the bird to their facility. This author identified the bird as an Oriental Scops Owl *Otus sunia* from the screenshot taken from the video, cross-referencing with current works by Kazmierczak (2000), and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). As per the description therein, it was identified as a rufous morph individual [48].

The Oriental Scops Owl *Otus sunia* is a small polymorphic owl that occurs in grey-brown and rufous morphs (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It occurs widely across the Indian Subcontinent, eastern Asia, eastern Siberia, and the Malay Peninsula. Out of the multiple recognized subspecies of the Oriental Scops Owl, *O. s. sunia* is found in Pakistan (Punjab), the lower Himalaya region from Kumaon to Nepal, Bhutan, Bengal, Bangladesh, and Assam, southwards to Punjab and Central India (König & Weick 2008). Ali & Ripley (1981) include parts of Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh (and the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand) in its distribution. It affects forests (deciduous and evergreen), orchards, groves of densely foliated trees around cultivation, etc., (Ali & Ripley 1981). In the Indian Subcontinent, it also found in and around settlements and cultivation, and said to occur around city streetlights in Sri Lanka (Holt et al. 2020).

However, from Punjab, India, neither was any published record of *O. sunia* found (Pittie 2022), nor any historical specimens (GBIF 2022). Three preserved specimens tagged 'Punjab', lying in the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology (NSF 2020), turned out to be from present day Himachal Pradesh, which was earlier a part of Punjab. Social media groups of birders and eBird also did not yield any previous records from Punjab, India. On eBird (2022), the closest record is from near Solan, a hill town in Himachal Pradesh, towards the north-east of Rajpura, about 65 km. as the crow flies. A few more records are recorded from Himachal Pradesh. There is one record from Kalesar Wildlife Sanctuary, Yamunanagar District, in the northern part of Haryana and one from Udhampur, near Jammu. Also, there are a few records from Asola Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary, Delhi (including one from the part of the sanctuary in Faridabad District, Haryana). Other than those on eBird, Turaga (2014) has also discussed three sightings from Delhi: two from 1925, and one from 2011.

Thus, there have been quite a few observations of the Oriental Scops Owl from states around Punjab, but not any previous confirmed record from the state. Though the circumstances under which the bird got injured will remain a mystery, the chance discovery has confirmed the possibility of it being found in parts of Punjab. Perhaps, it exists in small numbers, but remains undetected being nocturnal. During daytime, it roosts singly, or sometimes in small parties, in dense foliage, against a tree trunk or in holes (König & Weick 2008). It is quite likely that the Oriental Scops Owl may be found in forested and hilly areas, wherever available, in northern and eastern parts of the state.

I thank Gurpreet Singh for sharing the video, and Jasbir Giri for rescuing the injured bird and narrating the situation in which the bird was found.

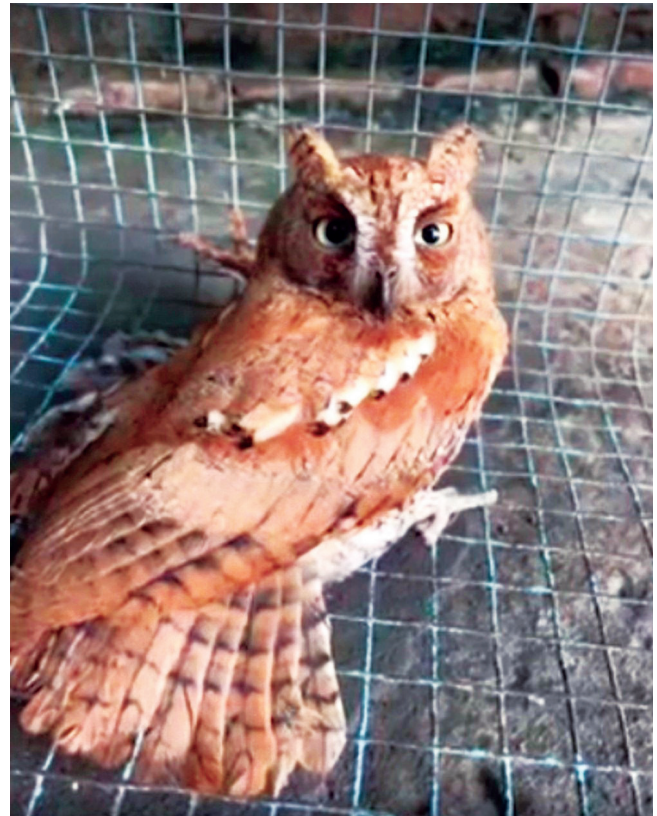


Photo extracted from video sent by Gurpreet Singh

48. Oriental Scops Owl at an animal shelter in Rajpura, Punjab.

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