

Noteworthy Records of Critically Endangered Forest Owlet *Athene (Heteroglaux) Blewitti* in the Amravati District of Maharashtra, Central India

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INTRODUCTION

The Forest Owlet *Athene (Heteroglaux) blewitti* is one of the least known birds of India. The forest owl was first collected and described in 1872 by Blewitt [1]. The Forest Owlet is Schedule I species protected under the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 and is listed as critically endangered species by IUCN 2003 (C2a) category in Red Data list [2]. It was considered extinct for 113 years, until its rediscovery on November 25, 1997, in Toranmal Reserve Forest of Shahada Nandurbar district, Maharashtra [1, 3-4]. Here we present the two opportunistic observations of Forest Owlet which were recorded in two different localities on 14th and 25th April 2011 at Melghat Tiger Reserve and near Amravati territorial forest area in Amravati district of Maharashtra.

During the survey on Tigers, co-predators and their prey in Melghat tiger reserve, which is situated in southern offshoot of Satpura Mountain range. The 1676.39 km² tiger reserve was established in 1973 is lies on Amravati and Akola districts. Apparently the habitat of Melghat Tiger Reserve includes the Forest Owlet reported by several studies [4-9]. But in the precise manner photographic observation of a rare and critically endangered species is worth document.

On 14th April 2011, 12: 33 hrs, a Forest Owlet was spotted while returning from the transect survey in Gurgipatti beat which lies in the undisturbed part of the core zone through compartment number 883 (21° 36' 94" N; 75° 53' 147" E). The forest owl was photographed in on a *Tectona grandis* the dominant tree species in the area. The heights of the trees ranged between 10-30m. At about 12:33 hrs an owl flew past us and we noted the plumage pattern and colour. We followed the bird and with the help of a field guide confirmed it to be the critically endangered forest owl

[10]. It sat on a branch of the tree for about 10 minutes. There after we followed the bird for about thirty minutes in order to find other individuals or its nesting site; but were unsuccessful. We approached the owl up to a distance of 50 meters and got an opportunity to take photographs. We also carefully observed its plumage. The crown, nape and back were unspotted brown, sharply contrasting with the broadly blackish and white banded tail. The breast looked entirely dull brown, contrasting sharply with the white belly [11].

One week later, on another occasion we rescued a forest owl in Amravati territorial forest guest house on 25th April 2011 where we resided in the territorial forest division guest house (20°55'39" N; 77°59'48" E). Apparently the guest house was constructed in the forest area (dry deciduous), fortunately the forest couldn't come under any reserve. At 17:12 hrs we rescued a forest owl, unfortunately we were unable to photograph it due to lack of camera. We were unable to determine the cause of the injury. The bird left eye was swollen and was unable to fly. We provided water and first aid and kept the bird in a safe place and we observed its plumage. The rescued forest owl precisely had collar visible and without white spots, the crown is dull brown and uniform, body plumage has mantle largely unspotted, moreover the tail pattern is broadly banded with dark brown and white bands and most importantly the wings are broader and below the wings brown breast and black and white, wings are not pointed but primary and secondary inners had white tip.

Thereafter two and half hours later the bird flew from the place where we kept and perched on a *Terminalia tomentosa* tree, whereas the area has dry deciduous forest of *Tectona grandis*, *Dendrocalamus strictus* and other associated plant species in its habitat includes *Terminalia tomentosa*,

Table 1: Locations of Forest owllet collections/observations in the Indian subcontinent

Sites name	Habitat Type	GPS Coordinate	Observer and Year
Eastern MP (now) Chhattishgarh	Dry deciduous	----	Blewitt (1872) ¹
Westernmost Orrisa	Dry deciduous	----	Valentine Ball (1877) ¹⁶
Taloda, Khandesh, Maharashtra	Dry deciduous	----	Davidson (1880 and 84) ¹⁵
Shahada- Toranmal	Dry deciduous	21° 49'N and 74°28'E	King and Rasmussen (1998) ¹
Taloda- Khandesh, Maharashtra	Dry deciduous	---	Rasmussen and Ishtiaq (1999) ¹²
Raipur village	Dry deciduous	21° 34'N and 77° 07'E	Ishtiaq and Rahmani (2000b) ⁶
Khaknar FR	Dry deciduous	----	Jathar and Rahmani (2004) ⁷
Yawal WLS	Dry deciduous	21° 36' N and 75° 53' E	Chavan and Rithe (2009) ¹⁴
Akrani	Dry deciduous	21°49'N and 74°28' E	Ishtiaq and Rahmani (2005) ⁴
Melghat TR	Dry deciduous	---	Mehta, et.al. (2007) ⁸
Northern Maharashtra	Dry deciduous	---	Yosef, et al. (2010) ⁹
Melghat TR	Dry deciduous	---	Pande et al. (2011) ¹⁰
Gurgipatti beat (Melghat TR) Near Amravati, Maharashtra	Dry deciduous	21° 19'N and 76° 59' E	Present record*

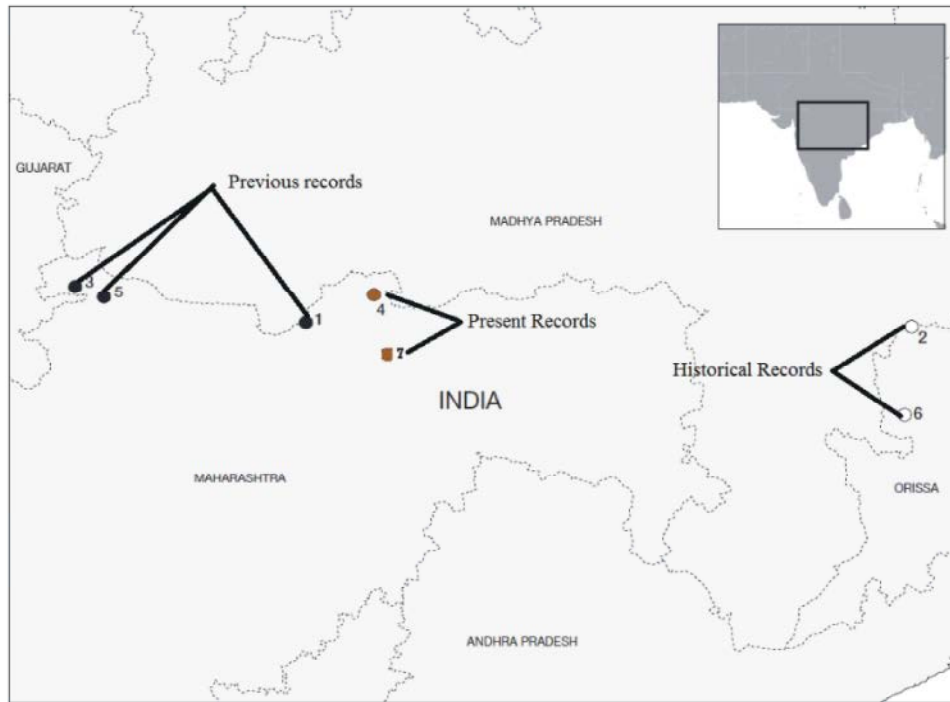


Fig. 1: The map showing few forest owllet *Athene (Heteroglaux) blewitti* observations/recorded places in the Indian subcontinent. Red dots are the present forest owllet records in the Amravati district of Maharashtra

Anogeissus latifolia, *Butea monosperma*, *Embllica officinalis*, *oswellia serrata*, *Ougeinia oojeinensis* and *Laegerstromia paviflora* [12]. Habitat preference is a dynamic process as the natural systems are also dynamic and many species are confined to specific habitat types [7, 13]. Previous records of Forest owllets whereas all in the dry deciduous habitats, an altitudinal range between

400m to 600m, precisely all factors coexists with present records and this observations revealed that the Forest owllet may indeed be a habitat specific (Table 1).The present record area (Amravati territorial forest) was about 166 km southwards from the previous record and it extending the distribution range where forest owllet recorded within Amravati district of Maharashtra.



Fig. 2: A Forest Owlet *Athene (Heteroglaux) blewitti* on *Tectona grandis* tree, Photographed on 14th April 2011 in Gurgipatti Beat, Melghat tiger reserve, Maharashtra.

However the species may exist or approach up to the urban limits, whereas the dry deciduous forests with moderate canopy cover and favourable factors such perennial water source still exist.

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