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Reconsideration of *Athene blewitti* (Hume)¹

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(With a plate)

A visit to northern and western Orissa in February, 1975, by Dr. Sálím Ali, my wife and myself was undertaken partly to ascertain the whereabouts of *Athene blewitti*, the enigmatic species of forest owlet, not recorded since Meinertzhagen collected a specimen in October, 1914 near Mandvi on the Tapti River northeast of Bombay.² The species has been recorded from there east to Sambalpur, Orissa, and the offer of hospitality and assistance from Shri Saroj Choudhury, Conservator of Forests for Wildlife of Orissa, prompted us to commence our search at the eastern end of the range, nearer the original type locality of Busnah, Phooljan State (near Padam-

pur, about 50 miles west of the bend of the Mahanadi River *circa* 21°N Lat., 83°E Long.). Although we worked the forested areas of the adjacent Mahanadi River carefully, using tape recordings of owl species to elicit calls at dusk and in the evening, we produced no evidence of the presence of *blewitti*.

In our search for owls in Orissa we were much aided by having put together a tape of owl calls provided through the generosity of the Cornell Laboratory of Bird Sounds, Dr. James L. Gullledge, Dr. Joe T. Marshall of Bangkok, the Edward Grey Institute and Dr. Claude Chappuis from Rouen. These owl calls were mostly of *Athene brama*, but included some

¹ Accepted July 1975.

² At my request Shri S. A. Hussain of the B.N.H.S. staff visited Mandvi April 19-21, 1976. No trace of the former heavy forest recorded years ago was to be found, but there is a small undulating terrain of thin forest surrounded by cultivation about 4 km east of the town.. Farther east and northeast there are patches of forest, which may well deserve more

exploration. Heavy exploitation for timber and firewood continues. Only *Athene brama* was observed near the thin patch of forest. A short but intensive ten day visit to the Melghat Tiger Reserve area in near by Maharashtra in February, 1976 by Dr. Sálím Ali and party and myself revealed similar conditions and no evidence so far of the presence of *Athene blewitti*.

additional calls of *Bubo* and *Otus*. The chattering, cackling taped calls of *Athene brama* proved highly effective in decoying specimens of that owlet out of their perches and into the neighbourhood of our flashlights, so that we were able easily to see the birds as they flew back and forth over our heads and perched on nearby trees. The recorded owl calls were far more effective in eliciting response by the latter part of the month of February than they had been in the beginning, thus correlating with the onset of display prior to the breeding season. In the case of other species we were unable to decoy the birds towards us. We did hear calls of *Bubo coromandus*, *Glaucidium radiatum* and one or more unidentified *Bubo* as well as *Athene brama*. No curious or unidentified *Athene* calls were heard which might give an indication of the calls of *Athene blewitti*. Thus there is no information on the vocalization of Blewitt's Owl.

On my return to the United States I borrowed five of the half dozen known specimens of *Athene blewitti* for comparison with a small series of *Athene brama indica*. I am grateful to Dr. Snow of the British Museum (Natural History), Dr. Paynter of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard, and Dr. Lester Short of the American Museum of Natural History for the loan of these specimens.

These birds are largely unspotted on the crown above and between the white supra-ocular aspects of the facial disk. Small subterminal single flecks of dull white appear scattered on individual feathers, on the shaft of the feather itself, while in *brama* these spots are numerous, subterminal also, but bifid, lying on either side of the darker area of the feathers which includes the shaft.

The pale nuchal collar is reduced in *blewitti*, barely visible as scattered subterminal whitish spots in one specimen. Spotting is reduced on

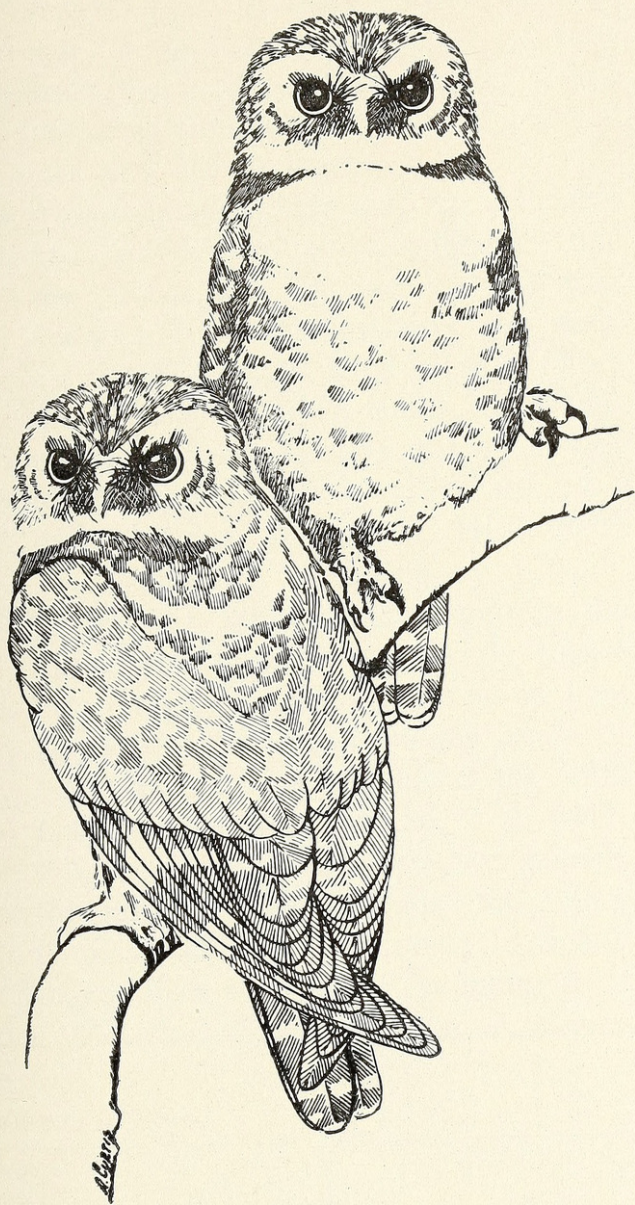
the scapulars and back which produces a plain, uniform darker grayish-olive-brown appearance, in contrast to the grayish-olive-brown interspersed with many pairs of subterminal spots of *indica*. The white spots on the primaries and secondaries are in general remarkably similar and give the same effect in both species. In contrast the white tail stripes are broader and more noticeable in *blewitti* (more than 5 millimetres in width, versus less than 5 mm in width and sometimes discontinuous in *brama*).

Below *brama* appears less banded with dark olive-brown on the collar below the throat, the band broken centrally, while in *blewitti* the band is noticeable, concolorous and continuous across the throat. Below this collar in both species there is a white central patch on the lower throat and upper chest followed by a broad patch of dark olive-brown which is only lightly striped with white subterminally, and meets in the centre of the chest. In *brama* this is less well defined, heavily barred with subterminal white bars, and merges gradually into the irregular olive-brown barring of the thighs and stomach. In *blewitti* the heavy dark olive-brown barring appears to be more confined to the flanks, leaving a clear patch of white in the centre of the stomach, lower flanks and thigh coverts.

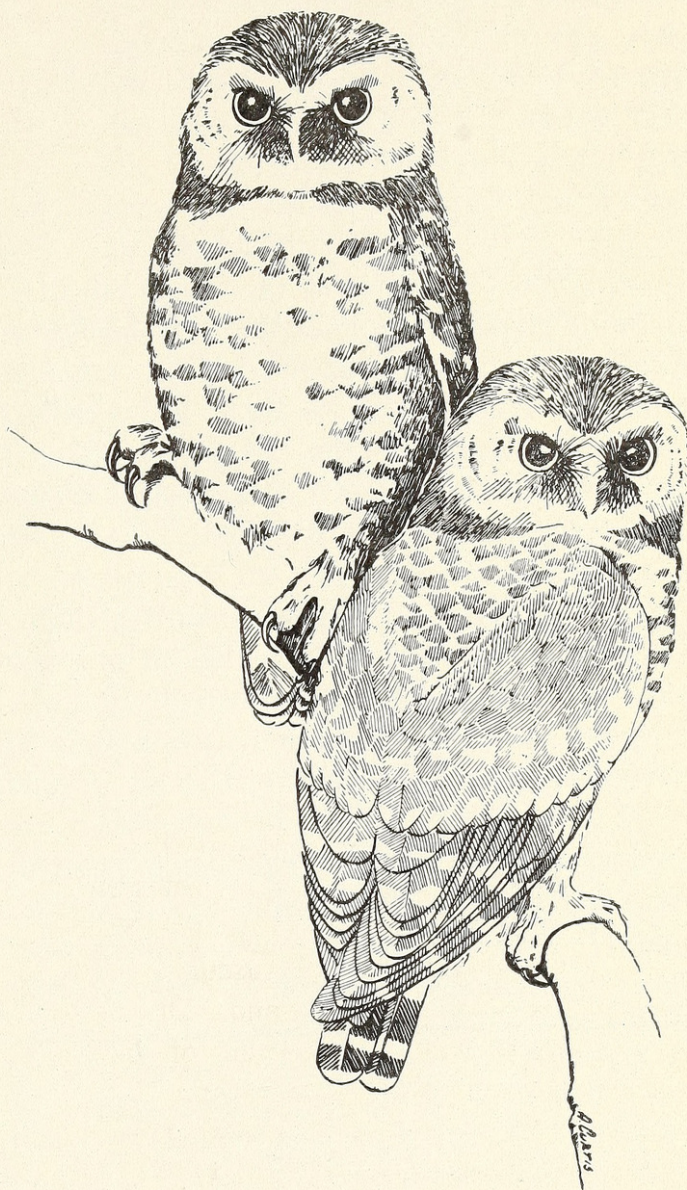
In our Museum Diagnosis (1969, HANDBOOK BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN, 3, p. 303), Dr. Sálim Ali and I speak of the wing formula of *blewitti* as given in the various earlier texts, i.e. 3rd or 4th primary longest or the two subequal; 1st primary (from the outside) = 8th or a little shorter.

Comparing the five specimens examined, I find that each specimen differs slightly from the above, as follows:

- (1) *Male* (BM Reg. No. 1965 M 5230); 3rd and 4th primaries, counting from



Athene brama
Spotted Owlet



Athene blewitti
Forest Spotted Owlet



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