

9. SIGHTING OF THE ORIENTAL BAY-OWL *PHODILUS BADIUS SATURATUS* IN PAKHUI WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, WESTERN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

The Oriental Bay-Owl (*Phodilus badius*) has been considered a rare resident throughout its range in the Indian subcontinent, which consists of three disjunct areas (Ali and Ripley 1983, Hussain and Khan 1997). While there have been several recent records of the southern subspecies *assimilis* from the Anaimalai Hills and the Kalakkad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve, southern India (Kannan 1993, Mudappa 1998, Raman 2001), there have been no recent reports of the subspecies *saturatus* from either north-east India, or from western Arunachal Pradesh.

I sighted an individual of the Oriental Bay-Owl in Seijusa in Pakhui Wildlife Sanctuary (WS) on January 18, 1999. Pakhui WS is located in western Arunachal Pradesh, near the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border, and covers an area of 862 sq. km, with an altitudinal variation from 100 to 2,000 m. The major vegetation type of Pakhui WS is tropical semi-evergreen forest. There are adjacent tracts of intact forest areas, logged forests, plantations and agricultural settlements. Extensive loss of forest cover and degradation has occurred mainly in some areas in adjacent Assam. Around 267 bird species have been recorded from this area, and six other species of owls have been reported (Datta *et al.* 1998). The main threats to the existence of these forests are logging and settlements, hunting. Minor disturbances are extraction of cane, agar (*Aquillaria agallocha*), and other minor forest produce.

The owl was sighted at an altitude of c. 300 m, which was c. 500 m from the Forest Department Range offices and 50 m from a frequently used forest trail. Locals and forest staff often move through the area to cut firewood and poles for construction, and to collect food and medicinal plants, mushrooms and black dammar (*Canarium resiniferum*).

I first spotted the owl at 0815 hrs and watched it for the next half hour. It was facing me with closed eyes, perched on a horizontal branch of a small understorey tree c. 5 m from the ground. As the species was unfamiliar to me, I sketched and photographed it



Fig. 1: Oriental bay-owl perched on an understorey tree in Pakhui Wildlife Sanctuary, Arunachal Pradesh

(Fig. 1). It seemed quite unperturbed, though we were standing and watching it from such close quarters. It remained motionless for half an hour. The owl opened its eyes once or twice, but otherwise ignored our presence. Interestingly, earlier daytime sightings of this bird have reported that it could be observed for quite some time, because it did not fly away immediately on being disturbed (Kannan 1993, Mudappa 1998).

The Bay-Owl seems rare and ranges from foothill forests up to 1,500 m in NE India. The subspecies *saturatus* is reported from Nepal, Sikkim, Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam, north and south of the Brahmaputra river (Ali and Ripley 1983), and also South-East Asia. However, the present observation is the first record for Arunachal Pradesh.

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APARAJITA DATTA

Wildlife Institute of India,
Chandrabani, P.O. Box 18,

Dehradun 248 001, Uttaranchal, India.

Present Address: c/o Nature Conservation India
3076/5, 4th cross, Gokulam Park, Mysore 570 002.

Email: aparajita_dl@rediffmail.com

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