

Owl Post



issue 3





Spotted owllet

Image by Bipro Behera, Rushikulya, Odisha



Brown hawk owls

Image by Monjul Hazarika, Sivasagar, Assam

WELCOME BACK TO OWL POST



Dear Owlfriend,

It's no mystery that owls are considered among the most mysterious birds in the world. Across cultures and centuries, layer upon layer of beliefs have shrouded them, some reverent, some ridiculous, but all very human.

Coming in all sizes, shapes, and patterns, owls often remind us of ourselves. Their forward-facing eyes, which drastically (*and dramatically*) set them apart from other birds. While some species look somewhat intimidating with their tall stance, razor-sharp talons, and those smooth, stern-looking plumicorns (*feathered tufts often mistaken for ears or horns*), others have disarmed us entirely, thanks to their undeniable "cuteness". The *Athene* family is a global favourite, and we have our very own *Athene brama*, the spotted owlet, to thank for our local dose of adorably grumpy drama.

Now, I may be wrong here, but I've noticed how easy it is to forget that these smaller owls- scops owls, jungle owlets, little owlets, and spotted owlets- are, in fact, raptors. I mean, who can blame us? These floofballs are unintentionally hilarious. It doesn't help that they take themselves very seriously.

Take the spotted owlet, for instance- with their thick Eugene Levy-like white eyebrows, a Santa Claus-esque beard, a smooth little spotted head, and a cream belly sprinkled with more dots. They carry a permanent frown that's somehow both endearing and accusatory. And when they're asleep, snuggled together in what looks like a cosy group sleepover- it's a whole new level of "cute". Then there's the brown hawk owl, with chocolate-brown feathers marked by cream heart-like patterns and neon-orange eyes that look straight into your soul. A face that has an expression of a teacher quietly disappointed with your final exam answer sheet, and preparing a stern speech. But truly, they're just shy little raptors wrapped in cosmic charm- almost too magical to be real, yet very much a part of our landscape.

And yet, despite their beauty and ecological value, they remain misunderstood. Seen by many as omens of death or doom. Thanks to their eerie calls, silent flight, stealthy camouflage, and preference for the dark, it's easy to see them as witches' messengers rather than what they actually are- just birds trying to make a living, like any other creature around us, I presume. Their calls echo through our backyards at night, whether you're in the middle of a bustling city or tucked away in a rural corner of India. Every community hears these calls differently, interprets them through its own lens, and responds with emotions that are...well, complicated, to say the least.

But perhaps we can start listening differently. We're here to simplify, to rediscover, to peel back the myths...to trace how we've related to them over time, and gently ask ourselves: "*how do we feel about owls, really?*"

Sometimes it takes years to undo a belief. Sometimes, it just takes one story. So tell me, Owlfriend... *how do you feel about owls?* And is that a question you're ready to answer?

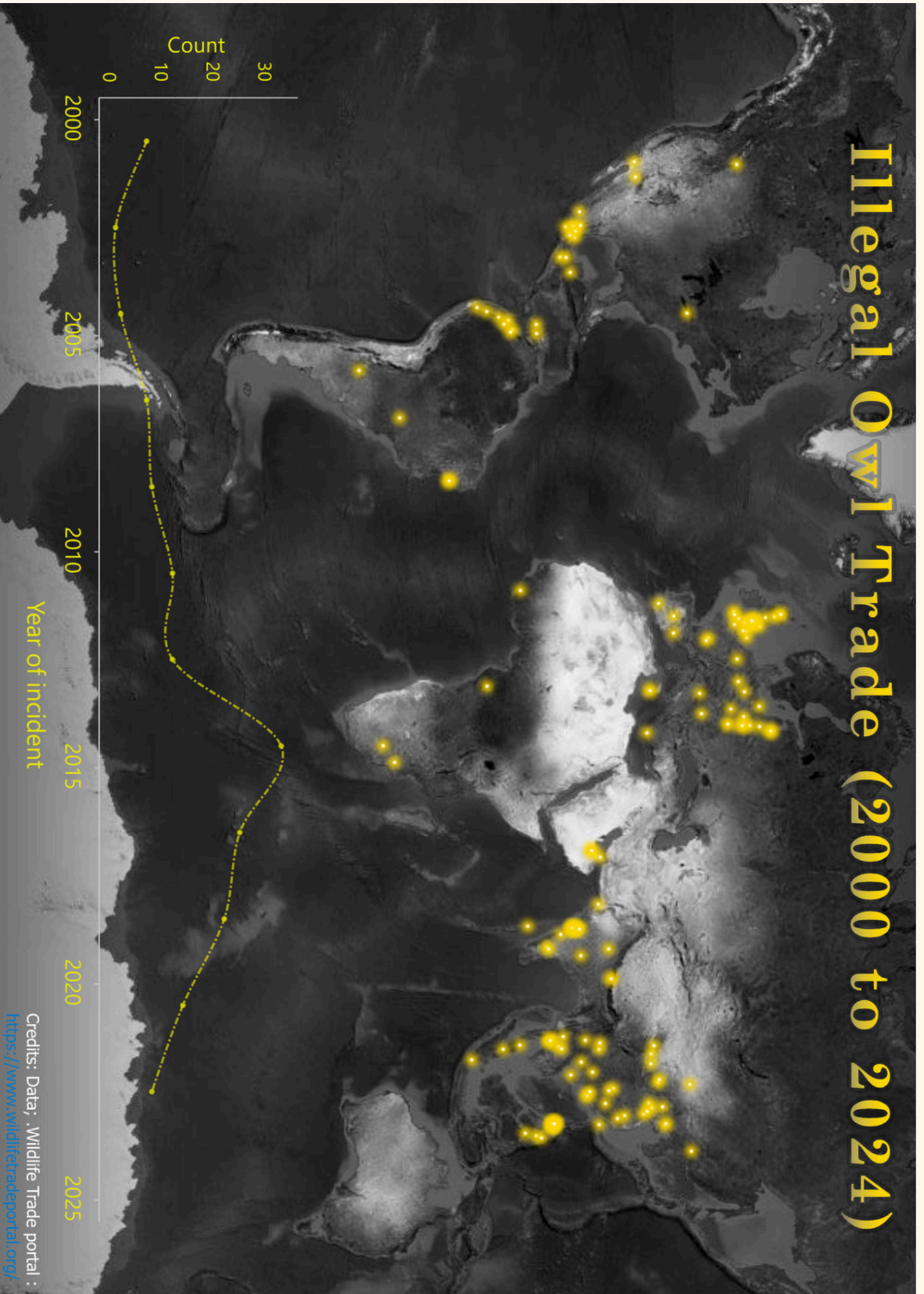
With feathers and fondness,
~ Debangini

FOLLOWING THEIR PLIGHT...

~Pratiksha Chalke

A distribution map for owls in Illegal Wildlife Trafficking (IWT)

Illegal Owl Trade (2000 to 2024)



Credits: Data: Wildlife Trade portal : <https://www.wildlifetradeportal.org/>

Between 2000 and 2024, scattered across various countries and places worldwide, these dots mark more than just locations; they echo the silent cries of owls caught in the net of illegal wildlife trade.

This map draws from data extracted via the **Wildlife Trade Portal**, compiled through the dedicated efforts of organisations and individuals committed to documenting wildlife crime. While it may not capture every instance of illegal owl trade, it serves as a stark visual of known incidents over the years. This map aims not to be exhaustive, but to raise awareness and spark dialogue around the conservation of these silent night dwellers.

“WOO! HELLO HUMAN...”

~Debangini



Don't be spooked, it's just us- the coolest owls ever! Humans have named us **brown hawk owls**, though sometimes you guys call us 'boobooks' because of the calls we make...that is one adorable name.

We belong to the *Ninox* genus, and no, we aren't related to hawks. We think that humans see our falcon-like silhouettes and upright, alert posture resembling hawks, but who knows what goes on inside your heads? We have to admit, though, that our sleek chocolate brown plumage, streaked with white below, almost forming heart-shaped patterns, and no fancy facial disc, is nothing short of breathtaking.

We're the size of your iPad Pro or your sofa cushion, which makes it easy for us to sneak between branches without looking awkward. We're crepuscular and nocturnal birds, so our shift starts post-evening chai and pre-Netflix, and goes into the night when you might stay awake doomscrolling or finishing up your presentation for the next day.

Salim Ali noted that we have this “**peculiar whimpering yaow, yaow, yaow call**”, which you'll most likely hear repeated every few seconds. It's not a ghostly call, it's more like... a persistent kitten purring to get your attention. But sometimes we also talk in this series of rising “**oooo uk..ooooo uk**” or “**woo-wuh! woo-wuh! woo-wuh!**” It's mesmerising, isn't it?

You may spot us on an after-dinner walk, perched around streetlights in urban areas, our unblinking neon yellow eyes following the buzz of a juicy cicada. We're what the ecologists call “insectivorous generalists,” which is fancy-speak for “*we'll eat whatever's small-sized, edible and moving.*” Big beetles, moths, cicadas, grasshoppers- though we'll gladly snack on small vertebrates too during nesting season when we need the protein boost.

We're common in the Himalayan foothills, northeastern states, the central plains, the Western Ghats, and parts of the eastern coast. It's wonderful if we can find spaces in wooded groves, temple premises, old city parks, and sleepy corners of semi-urban spaces across India, preferring to nest in tree cavities and hollows, but humans are making the availability of nice homes a little difficult these days. So, we try to adjust in abandoned buildings, ledges, nooks and even covered gaps in house verandahs, anything that gives us shade, seclusion, and enough space to raise our hungry fluffballs. We don't build nests (*no time for the DIY nonsense*), but we do reuse cavities across years if they stay safe.

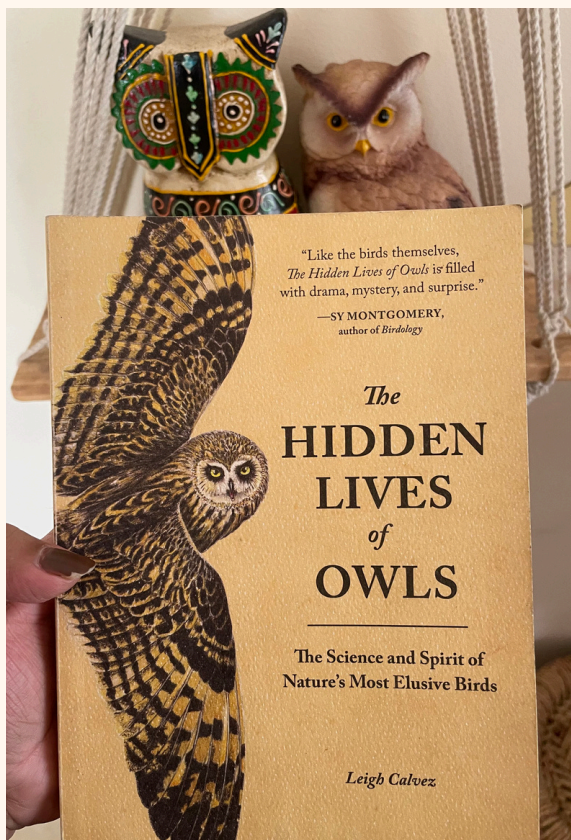
So many of you think we're evil omens. Yes, we agree that there is a no-nonsense, slightly judgmental air about us, especially with our stern gazes (*we would roll our eyes if we could*), but we don't curse you or cause you harm, do we? We even try raising our young away from your bustling lights. But we're not untouched by the threats that loom over us in the cities. The blinding lights, the lightning-speed cars, the jolting power grids, the poison persisting in our prey or the deafening noise...worst of all, your intolerance, not wanting to share the big urban spaces with us. Still, we try to survive. Because we know something you keep forgetting: **you need us**. Not just for pest control or poetic metaphors, but as part of the balance you rarely notice until it's gone.

So the next time you hear a soft meow or woop from your backyard neem or the tall peepal near your bus stop, look up, maybe it's not a cat. Maybe it's us saying hello. With our big lamp-like eyes wishing you well.



GIVE US A HOOT!

Book
Review



The hidden lives of owls by Leigh Calvez

"To see an owl, you have to become part of the landscape."

Camouflage is not just for owls: it's for the humans hoping to glimpse them, too. In this book, Leigh Calvez invites you to blur the line between observer and environment, until the moss softens underfoot and your breath syncs with dusk.

In *The Hidden Lives of Owls*, Calvez offers more than nocturnal field notes; she becomes one with the owl kingdom. She walks beside biologists, peers through mist nets, and crouches in moonlit forests to understand the pint-sized sass of the northern saw-whet owl to the ventriloquism of the flammulated owl, unravelling each riddle that is wrapped in feathers, evolution, and myth.

If you've ever squinted at the treetops or gazed at the night sky hoping for a glimpse of an owl, this book is for you. It will quietly tell you about their natural history with the perfect balance of heart, ethno-awareness and science!

OF RAIN, OWLETS AND REUNIONS!

~Krishnandu Sarkar



I sipped my morning tea on the veranda, mentally preparing myself for another day at the office. My eyes travelled to the chaotic mess created by the previous night's storm, which depicted the wild and unrestrained fury of nature. My garden was clearly treated as a canvas for this masterpiece. The hedge drooped sideways, broken branches of all sizes scattered everywhere, the pathway tree was almost entirely uprooted, somehow managing to hang on by latching itself to the electrical lines, and all

my seasonal flowering plants looked like zombies. With a sigh, I wondered when the power would be restored. I have been witnessing this for the past two years during monsoons, ever since I've been posted in Pithoragarh district, Uttarakhand. My dark thoughts about the rain damage were interrupted by Rajender. I ended up not hearing a word of what he spoke—something about me having a visitor.

Ramdutt, a local villager who had walked in, said, ***"Pani ne bahut nuksan kar diya"*** (the rain has caused a lot of damage). I nodded.

Rajender offered him tea and crispy salted biscuits. However, Ramdutt looked at me, hands folded and said, ***"Isko bacha lo sahab"*** (save him, sir). At last, I noticed that Ramdutt had carried a small corrugated box with him, which he had placed on the table. When I took a look inside, I was surprised to see an **Asian barred owlet chick**. The look on its face and bright yellow eyes clearly indicated that it was scared and under stress.

Taking a sip of tea, Ramdutt started narrating the tale from how the rain started the previous evening and created havoc, to the present morning when he decided to take a stroll to assess the weather situation. That's when he came across this small hatchling shivering on the ground near an uprooted tree.

"Kavuaa maar deta sahab, isi liye lekar aaya hu. Abhi aap hi isko bachaa saktey ho." (Crows would have killed him, hence I brought him to you. Only you can save him now).

Ramdutt continued talking about how this must be a divine intervention, as he was chosen to find this lost baby; I kept nodding and replying in single words. My head was busy rummaging for ideas about what my course of action should be. I was already late for the office, where I had a hundred pending tasks waiting for me.

As I gently lowered my hand into the box, the little chick immediately climbed up my hand over to my shoulder and snuggled itself near my ear. Ramdutt looked pleased with this sight. As he left, I praised him for his effort to save a life. He had walked almost 3 km in this weather to bring the chick to me.

Before he told me, he said to me with hope, ***“Isko paalna sahab”*** (Kindly raise him).

I could not explain to Ramdutt at that moment that we cannot keep owls as pets, but the simple man had prioritised humanity over all else. He had come to me because he knew I had rescued and managed to save a barn owl a few months ago. I kept my hand gently on the chick's chest and felt the heartbeat; I was surprised to find that it was normal. I carefully checked each wing and the body and found that it was not physically wounded but slightly disoriented. I decided to keep it in my study room, which had a decorative driftwood which could potentially serve as a perch. I quickly made a solution of ORS to feed the baby. Imagine my amusement- as soon as I put the chick on the perch, it hopped down with a ‘pop’ and rocked unsteadily with its limbs towards me; when I moved, it followed me.

I picked it up and placed it on my study table, and said, ***“Just stay here, I will be back soon”***. I closed the door. I asked Rajender what he was making for lunch, to which he promptly replied, *“chicken curry and rice”*. I decided to give the chick some protein feed, which would take care of his food requirement until I returned late afternoon.

When I returned to the room, I was pleasantly surprised to see the chick was in the exact spot on the table where I had left it. I tried to gently put a small piece of chicken near its mouth, to which it opened its beak and swallowed it. When I tried it again, it refused to eat. I decided against trying further, not wanting to stress the bird, and closed the door as I left the room.

Before leaving for the office, I gave a list of Dos and Don'ts to Rajender. All this while, I couldn't stop thinking about the adorable little chick, which must have fallen from its tree, may have been orphaned and might never be able to go back to its family again. Ramdutt had said he had searched for its parents in the area but in vain; in fact, many crows were waiting to attack the fallen chick.

I went back home for lunch in the afternoon and dashed to the room. To my relief, the chick was fine and had pooped in quite a few places around the room.

Rajender had even kept an old newspaper to prevent my table from being soiled, but that didn't quite work. The chick looked much better than it had in the morning. When I approached it, it once again started to come towards me. Trying not to get used to human presence, I avoided contact with it and closed the door.

After lunch, I sat for a while, lost in my thoughts and worried about my next course of action, when Rajender brought me tea and said, ***“Kuch bataana tha”*** (I have something to say).



I expected him to ask for leave or something of that kind, but instead, I was stunned to hear what Rajender had to say.

After I had left for the office, Rajender was busy doing some damage control in the garden when he heard a strange call. After initial bewilderment, he realised that it was the chick who was calling from inside the house (*incidentally, the table where the chick was placed is next to the window, which has been fitted with a mosquito net*). Rajender went into the room to check if all was well, but he didn't notice anything amiss. Once again, he got back to work, but the chick kept calling at regular intervals. After he finished his work, he was startled to find that there was an adult owl on the window, and it was interacting with the chick inside. Then the adult flew away and perched on the lamp post near the entrance. As he finished narrating, I looked towards the lamp post but saw nothing there. Rajender smiled and said, **“Sahab aap ke baye taraf dekho gate ke upar”** (*Take a look to your left at the garden gate*).

I couldn't believe my eyes. An adult Asian barred owlet was perched on the garden gate just ten feet away from where I sat, looking straight at me. Rajender further added to my bewilderment by saying that not one but two adult owls had come to sit on the window. Like a wizard, Rajender smiled and pointed to my right, where another adult was perched on the branch of a tree.

I took a few moments to gather myself. I started to recall that an Asian barred owl couple did reside in a hollow of a huge silver oak tree not far away from the house! I had seen them a few times in the past two years, once with two chicks! I would spot them in my garden in the evening, sometimes perched fearlessly on the hedge, sometimes on the lamp post and at times on the garden gate, probably waiting to hunt.

What I did next was absolutely unplanned but instinctive. I got up, walked inside the room, and picked up the chick, which promptly lodged itself on my arm without hesitation. I brought it out in the open and kept it on the roof of the gazebo (*which was a sit-out made of bamboo with a grass-thatched conical roof*). A few drops of rain greeted me and the chick. I stepped back and sat on my chair on the veranda to watch what would unfold. The very next moment, the female (*I'm guessing it was motherly behaviour*) called out as her eyes locked into mine, and swiftly flew towards the chick. I quietly dashed inside the house to get my camera to capture the moment, heart pounding. When I returned, the chick was still on the gazebo roof, but the adult had flown back to the branch of the tree where the second adult was also perched.



The eyes of the adult female were transfixed on the chick, as the baby kept calling out to its parents. After a few minutes, I figured out what was going on. The mother wanted the chick to fly up to the branch all by itself. Talk about strict parenting! The chick started taking a few feeble steps on the thatched roof of the gazebo, probably calculating the distance between the roof and the branch in its clever little owl brain.



A few minutes passed by as we watched patiently, along with the parents, with bated breath. Finally, our little brave chick took off in a clumsy flight towards the branch, and it landed right next to the adult female! But the very next moment, Mommy Dearest hastily flew away, leaving the chick as confused as me. In less than a minute, she returned with a kill- a sparrow smeared in blood, freshly hunted, which she offered whole to her chick! But the chick would not eat, appearing a bit perplexed, making low calls to its mother. After some time, the mother begrudgingly tore the prey, yet the chick refused to eat.

The sun had set a while ago, and darkness swept over the garden. The street lamps started shining after a while, and yet the chick would not eat. Kids and their tantrums!



The doting mother flew out again along with the hunted prey, and in just a few minutes, she brought more food for the chick, though this time, there was a change in the menu; she had a beetle in her beak. The beetle seemed to excite the chick as it started flapping its wings. But once again, it couldn't figure out how to eat the beetle. The mother tried to feed the chick with its beak, but to no avail! After about fifteen to twenty minutes, we felt a surge of triumphant joy as the chick somehow finally figured out how to eat its meal!

The mother watched with satisfaction as the chick gobbled up the beetle and then flew away to catch another beetle, which the chick gobbled up in one go this time. This feeding session went on for some time- the mother would fly off at regular intervals to grab meals, which she would feed to her hungry little chick. After a while, the chick hopped to another branch. There were multiple calls from the office all this while, which Rajender kept answering while I was glued to my position and engrossed in



watching the owl chick drama happening right in my garden. Finally, I decided to call it a day and went inside to see a happy Rajender. **“Chalo accha hua usko maata aur pitaa dono mil gaye”** (It’s great that the chick has found its mother and father).

I had a smile on my face that night when I dozed off to sleep.

The next day, as I walked past the big tree in my garden, I heard a faint call. I looked up so quickly

that I almost craned my neck. The sight that greeted my eyes made my day! The chick was perched on a high branch, and just on another adjacent branch higher up, was one of the parents looking straight at me as if to say, “I am guarding my chick now”.

After about a fortnight, I again strolled in my garden on a leisurely Sunday evening, and once again, I heard some owl calls from the silver oak tree. Upon closer look, I was delighted to see the adult female feeding a juvenile chick (which I recognised as the chick we had rescued) and right next to it, sat a small chick, most probably its younger sibling! It soon got its turn to eat as the mother flew in with another kill.

It was one of the happiest moments of my life, and I called out to Rajender to share this amazing sight. He, too, had a huge smile on his face!

All images: Krishnandu Sarkar



Editor’s note:

This is one of those stories which is rare, precious and needs to be understood from the perspective of human-animal relationships. When I read it, I realised how incredibly lucky both the humans and the birds were to have found one another in this particular story. Things could have gone awry (as they often do), and sometimes, well-intentioned citizens who try to save a bird in distress often lack the technical know-how, which leads to tragic outcomes. And then sometimes, we find ourselves at that intersection, where we are forced to make a decision, and the lines get blurry. But what matters (at least that’s what I think) is asking ourselves- do we have the right knowledge and awareness to decide how to save another creature’s life? The answer to that will decide the difference between interference and intervention.

Krishnandu Sarkar is a retired army officer who has a profound experience with birds and their behaviour. A gentle note to the reader, to remember that it’s best to reach out to wildlife professionals if you don’t have the expertise.

To know more about owl rescues and who to connect with, please proceed to the end of the newsletter, where we are building a directory of helpline numbers across India. This is just an initial phase. Help us expand this directory by sending more information on more such organisations.

ON THE ROCKS...!

...in search of the Indian eagle owl

~Arijit Jere



The quarry rock face was imposing and mighty steep, with the white-stained streaks on its surface (*signs of bird droppings*), a stark contrast against the dark grey wall and ledges. Nearby, melodious calls of common ioras and magpie robins punctuated the quiet January morning. I was in search of a large and distinct-looking raptor with a penchant for hiding in plain sight.

This was my third trip to Pabe Ghat, a popular birding spot an hour away from Pune. I was hoping

to get “3rd-time lucky” and finally spot this majestic bird, known as the Indian eagle owl (*Bubo bengalensis*).

Interrupting my thoughts, a big brown-feathered form swooped from a rock ledge, at least two storeys high from the ground! I watched with bated breath...scouring the ledges and nearby rocks for its presence. And... *voila!* There it was! I found myself peering into two large, fiery orange-yellow globes- the massive eyes of the owl! Its magnetic stare burned through my vision. It was perched upright on a rock close to the water, as still as a statue. Its dark brown feathers contrasted with a lighter cream-coloured belly. Even perched, its size was remarkable. Then, it made the classic owl move, turning its head almost all the way around! This was quite a memorable moment, and I tried to capture it discreetly with my camera. This precious rendezvous ended when it flew away to its nesting spot. It was a heartwarming experience to see these rare, majestic owls, hardly an hour away from my home!

The local inhabitants of the area seem to be generally aware of owl presence. Recently, for example, one of the chicks of a nesting brown fish owl unfortunately fell off the quarry ledge. Luckily, some alert bird-watchers in the area promptly called a rescue helpline, and the chick was rescued, rehabilitated and safely released back to its nest.

A couple who own a small tea stall near a wooded patch adjoining the quarry, happily recall the dawn calls of another large owl found here - the mottled wood owl. Chatting with these folks about the owl brought a smile to my face!

The heartwarming fact that families of three large owl species have survived and thrived here for a decade is a testament to a harmonious coexistence with the local community. This story gives me hope, and I wish that these wonderful, mysterious and silent hunters of the night continue to live in peace.



Anatomy of an owl

(Don't show this to her please)



Debangini

~Debangini



SAVING OUR HOOTS!

RESQ Charitable Trust, Pune

RESQ Charitable Trust is a Pune-based non-profit organisation that works tirelessly to rescue and rehabilitate injured, orphaned, and distressed wildlife. Since its inception in 2007, RESQ has played a key role in addressing urban human-wildlife conflict with a dedicated team of veterinarians, wildlife rescuers, and volunteers. Their Wildlife Transit Treatment Centre operates in collaboration with the Maharashtra Forest Department, handling thousands of rescue cases every year. Among the wide variety of species they care for, RESQ has responded to numerous owl rescues, including barn owls, Indian eagle owls, and spotted owlets, many of which are victims of window collisions, electrocution, or illegal captivity. Earlier this year, the team rescued a scops owl entangled in kite string and suffering from wing injuries. After treatment and rehabilitation, the owl was successfully released back into its natural habitat. Through their round-the-clock rescue hotline and public awareness initiatives, RESQ continues to be a critical lifeline for urban wildlife in and around Pune.



*Citizens of Pune can call their rescue helpline number **+91-9172511100**, for matters concerning distressed wildlife. You can follow their page on Instagram **@resqct** for their rescue stories.*

Image: RESQ CT, Pune



Owl Rescue in your city : Hoot to call?

- | | |
|--|----------------------------|
| • Resqink Association for Wildlife Welfare (RAWW), Mumbai- | +91-9869780202, 7666680202 |
| • RESQ Charitable Trust, Pune- | +91-9172511100 |
| • Wildlife Rescue, New Delhi- | +91-9810029698 |
| • NatureMates, Kolkata- | +91-9477275731, 9432641597 |
| • Malabar Awareness and Rescue Centre for Wildlife, Kannur- | +91-9895 255 225 |
| • Avian and Reptile Rehabilitation Centre (ARRC), Bengaluru- | +91-9449642222 |
| • Benhail Antao, Panjim- | +91-9823521879 |
| • North Goa Forest Department- | +91-8322228772 |
| • South Goa Forest Department- | +91-8322750246 |

Do you know any wildlife rescue organisations in your city? Are you part of a wildlife rescue organisation? Please send us your contact details, website link and/or a summary of your work at urbanowlnetwork@gmail.com and we will add you to our directory!



Don't forget to write to us!

Drop us an **email** with your feedback and suggestions.
Send us your artwork, photographs, encounters, stories, articles and anecdotes on owls. Don't forget to follow us on **Instagram** and give us a shout-hoot if you liked this issue!

The Owl Post is a non-funded outreach output, solely attempted to create curiosity and awareness among urban crowds for owls. Please feel free to contribute content or give feedback.

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Please fill up this [questionnaire survey](#) if you wish to help us understand urban owls better through our research

the parliament

Editor | Designer



Debangini Ray

An interdisciplinary ecologist studying urban owls through the lens of multi-species ethnography, Debangini believes in the power of community engagement in urban biodiversity conservation, which led her to initiate the Urban Owl Network. A PhD student at MIT World Peace University and engaged with the Chatur Ullu Lab, Pune, she also works with the Dakshin Foundation, Bengaluru.

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Colonel Krishnandu Sarkar (Retd)

A retired Indian army officer and bird lover, Krishnandu is also an avid photographer and has conducted multiple studies to understand bird behaviour. He is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Wildlife Conservation, his research specialising in avian studies and critical habitats.

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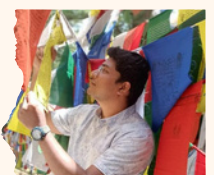
Arjit Jere

A nature writer and educator who currently contributes to the environment section for The Hindu Young World: a monthly supplement for kids. He aims to reconnect people to nature through his trails. When not working, he's busy birdwatching or documenting insects in Pune's hilly grasslands.

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Dr Pankaj Koparde

An evolutionary ecologist, founder of [Chatur Ullu Lab](#) and admin of [OwlIndia](#), [DragonflySouthAsia](#) and [RoadKill Network](#), Pankaj actively engages in outreach through the use of popular media and citizen science. He is also an Assistant Professor at the [Faculty of Sustainability Studies](#), MIT-World Peace University, Pune.

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