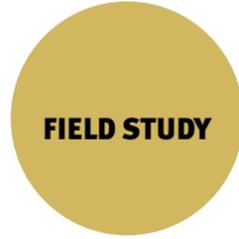


In Search of the Forest Owlet

The deciduous forests of the North Western Ghats prove to be a natural habitat for the extremely rare Forest Owlet in Dang, Gujarat.

TEXT AND IMAGES: KAUSHAL PATEL



In August 2015, after receiving sufficient funding from Mohammad bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund IdeaWild, I was at my hometown Bilimora in Gujarat's Navsari district. While I was preparing and checking my field gear before leaving for the Dang forests of Gujarat I played a bird call through a portable speaker. Construction work was going on near my building and Vikas, a young boy, came up to me and asked, "Are you playing a call of *Barik Thorpiya Duda*?" I was highly surprised that a young boy came up with such an interesting name. "Where did you hear this bird call before?" I asked. "This bird is very common in my village in the Dang forests," he replied.

To deliberately confuse the young man, I showed him photographs of India's most common owl species, the Spotted Owllet. He refused saying that the call that I was playing was not of *Barik Chirbiliya Duda* (in the Dangli language). "*Thorpiya Duda* looks similar to *Chirbiliya Duda* but they are slightly different from each other. *Thorpiya Duda* has a square head with very few spots on it, and its eyebrow and lower breast is white in colour almost without any marks," Vikas added. I was amazed by his knowledge. I, then, showed

him photographs of a Forest Owlet and Vikas immediately recognised it as a '*Thorpiya Duda*' and said that it is active during the day while others are active during the dusk or night. He went on to explain the etymology of the local names. '*Duda*' means owl in Dangli (*Ghuwad* in Gujarati), while '*barik*' refers to its small size. '*Thorpiya*' comes from the call and behaviour of the Forest Owlet.

The Forest Owlet is a rare bird endemic to India. It was thought to be extinct for about more than 100 years, though in 1997, the bird was rediscovered from Khandesh, Maharashtra by Dr. Pamela Rasmussen. Only about 70-400 mature individuals are present today in the deciduous forests of India with patchy distribution, as per available data. There are not more than twelve locations that are known for its occurrence, mainly in the Central Indian landscape. In 2014, a new location was reported from Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary, Maharashtra, which is a part of Northern Western Ghats (NWG). Given Vikas' vast knowledge of the Forest Owlet, it wasn't surprising that when I told him about the rare nature of the Forest Owlet, he merely smiled at me and said, "Visit my village. I will show you three or four birds at our farm itself!"



Subhan, a responsible forest guard, a hope for the future of the forest owlet in Dang

A JOURNEY BEGINS

After a week, I decided to visit his village called Bhendmad in Dang, and carried photographic sheets of three sympatric owl species occurring in this region – Spotted Owllet, Forest Owllet and Jungle Owllet, a portable speaker, GPS and binoculars. Vikas was at his farm, so I showed the photographic sheet to his father. The old man exactly mimicked the call of all these three owllets with his voice. I was shocked and highly excited. We – my friend Mukesh, Vikas' father and I – visited his farm and played a Forest Owllet call. After five minutes, three individuals responded to the call.

Dang district contains Gujarat's thickest mixed deciduous forests cover along with bamboo. Given the forests' importance, two protected areas, namely Vansda National Park (24 sq. km.) and Purna Wildlife Sanctuary (160 sq. km.), were declared in the late 1980s. These forests form the northern tip of the Western Ghats. Despite the pristine forest cover in southern Gujarat, very few studies have been conducted to document the flora and fauna of this region. Once traditional hunters, locals have now shifted to agriculture and transformed the habitat into relatively open deciduous forests. Due to water crisis in late winter and summer, agriculture is very seasonal to monsoon and unique practices such as using the same field during alternative years is believed to be productive. Given the suitable habitat (relatively open deciduous forests) and lack of documentation, it is not surprising that the Forest Owlet is yet to be discovered from these forests.

DECODING THE ENIGMA

My study aim was to assess the distribution and status of the Forest Owlet in the forests of Dang district. I realised that the locals (Dangli) were knowledgeable about the wildlife surrounding them and that we had to tap into this information to learn more about this enigmatic owl. I decided to interview the locals through audio-visual clues along with the call playback method, in which a pre-recorded call of the bird is played for 2-5 minutes after silence in a regular interval of 5 to 10 minutes per broadcasting location during which the birds respond if they are present. This method, when used with care and caution, is effective to detect the presence of elusive

species of birds.

While interviewing the locals by showing them pictorial sheets and audio calls of the owllets, most of them suggested that they have observed the Forest Owlet in their farms and the bird isn't uncommon in the district. I also enquired about any possible threat faced by these birds due to hunting for bush meat or for use in superstitious rituals and black magic, and since how many years have the locals been observing the Forest Owlet in the landscape.

Initially, I did not believe the statements made by the Dangis because of the Forest Owlet's rarity, but sooner I realised that their knowledge about wildlife around them is unparalleled. My study showed that the Forest Owlet was indeed relatively common throughout the hills of the Dangis. However, at the same time, a majority of locations are close to human settlements and outside the protected area, where slash and burn farming might pose a threat to the owllets.

Hunting of large mammals for bush meat was traditional practice just one or two decades ago; the evidence lies in the absence of large herbivores in this landscape. Many villagers have now shifted to hunting small mammals like hares, porcupines, wild boar, civets and wild cats. Birds are also hunted, especially large and cavity-nesting birds, with airguns and catapults. One such incident occurred at a Forest Owllet nesting location, when a 12-year-old boy herding cattle came closer and aimed his catapult at an owllet. I immediately stopped him and made him aware that this bird is so extremely rare that his action can push the bird towards the edge of extinction.

My study also introduced me to a few experienced and hardworking forest watchers such as Subhan, who was very aware of owllet locations and specifically nests in his range of Bardiapa in North Dang (Part of Purna Wildlife Sanctuary). Subhan and his father love the birds and continue to monitor their nests and tree cavities, which facilitate the owls for roosting and nesting sites, to protect them. With him, I located about 10 Forest Owllet locations and many Spotted Owllet locations in his range.

Subhan – a responsible, local forest watcher – gives me hope for the future of Forest Owllets in Dang. He can be a role model and generate a sense of ownership and responsibility, in turn inspiring others to protect the Forest Owlet from hunting and habitat loss. Also, making younger generations aware, partnering with them to locate new forest owllet locations and involving them in nest protection activities will secure the future of the Forest Owlet in this landscape.



Deities derived from nature worshipped in Dang



Nature gods in Dang



Forest owlet and Salim Ali's sparrow



Logging and lopping activity in the forest owllet positive area, Dang