

## Eurasian Scops Owl in Bhavnagar district

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### Introduction

The Eurasian Scops Owl (*Otus scops*) is a small sized owl. Out of the 16 species of owls recorded in Gujarat, four species are of the genus *Otus*, of which the Indian Scops Owl (*Otus bakkamoena*) and Oriental Scops Owl (*Otus sunia*) are resident, Pallid Scops Owl (*Otus brucei*) is a winter visitor and Eurasian Scops Owl is a vagrant (Ganpule 2016).

There are six races of Eurasian Scops Owl (Holt *et al.* 2017). In India, *O. s. pulchellus* and *O. s. turanicus* are stated as likely to occur, with the species reaching western India during fall (autumn) migration (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The *pulchellus* race of the Eurasian Scops Owl, which breeds from River Volga, east to Lake Baikal, and south to Altai and Tien Shan mountains, is migratory and winters in Africa, while birds of the race *turanicus*, which breeds up to north-west Pakistan, winter in south Pakistan and probably in western India (Holt *et al.* 2017). For Gujarat, Dharmakumarsinhji (1955) collected a specimen from Bhavnagar, commenting that it is a 'straggler' to Saurashtra, and there is a recent record from Bhavnagar district (Bhil 2016).

### Field Characters

The Eurasian Scops Owl is usually greyish in colour (but occurs in grey and brown morphs), with uniform black streaks on crown and mantle, rufous accents on scapulars and over the eyes, and long wings falling over the tail at rest. It is said to be 'not safely distinguishable in the field from Oriental Scops Owl, except by call' (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). In addition to other

features, the Eurasian Scops Owl has 'concentric dark and pale areas at back of head', which could be useful in its separation from the similar Oriental Scops Owl and Pallid Scops Owl (Chandran *et al.* 2016). Its call, a low, short, whistle 'tyew' or 'toow', which is repeated at intervals of every two-three seconds, is diagnostic (Holt *et al.* 2017).



### Details of sightings

After being informed by Batuk Bhil about the sighting of an unfamiliar species of owl, we visited the location near Nikol Bandhara (21° 05' N, 71° 51' E), Ta: Mahuva, Dist: Bhavnagar, on 11 October 2016. It is an area with agriculture farms, with scattered trees, and is very near to the sea coast. After an hour's search, we found a small owl roosting on an *Arni* (*Clerodendrum multiflorum*) tree at a height of 10-12 feet. We noted that it was greyish in colour, with notable rufous seen on the scapulars and mantle, which eliminated the possibility of this being a Pallid Scops Owl. It had long wings extending beyond the tail, and the tarsal feathering not extending onto the toes. The underparts were irregularly streaked, with cross barring on the lower belly. During the course of our observations, we heard its call twice - which was a small 'tuuew tuuew'. Thus, we could confidently identify it as a Eurasian Scops Owl, as the call of the Oriental Scops Owl is different. We took many photos, from different angles, to study the plumage of this individual.

As we were aware that there were very few confirmed records of this species in India, and that its status and distribution was still unclear, we made detailed observations, which are given below:

During the day time, it usually roosted in trees at only about 10-12 feet height. Surprisingly, it was not getting disturbed by farmers working nearby, or even by movement of vehicles near it. In one instance, we observed that a tractor passed very close by and shook the whole tree in which it was roosting (due to a gust of wind), but the bird did not get disturbed. After sunset, it used to become active by stretching its wings and preening, and started hunting. Its food mainly consisted of moths and grasshoppers caught in the air and sometimes, small insects caught from tree trunks. It hunted the whole night and in the morning, roosted at the same place. We observed this individual for almost one week, and after that, it was not seen

**Recent sightings of Eurasian Scops Owl in Bhavnagar district**

No.	Date	Place	No. of birds	Observers
1	20 October 2015	Near Nikol Bandhara, Ta: Mahuva, Dist: Bhavnagar	1	Batuk Bhil (Bhil 2016)
2	11 October 2016	Near Nikol Bandhara, Ta: Mahuva, Dist: Bhavnagar	1	Authors, Batuk Bhil
3	26 October 2016	Near Kalsar village, Ta: Mahuva, Dist: Bhavnagar	2	First author (VJ)

here even after an extensive search. But, we recorded two Eurasian Scops Owls at a new location near Kalsar village, Ta: Mahuva, Dist: Bhavnagar, on 26 October 2016. This location is only about seven kms away from the earlier place. Details of all three recent sightings are given in the table.



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**Discussion**

While we are unable to comment on the race seen here, it is pertinent to note that for the consecutive second year, the Eurasian Scops Owl has been recorded at the same place, and during the same period, which suggests that it is possible that Saurashtra falls in its migration route. It spends very few days here during the autumn migration period and so far, no sightings have been reported during the spring migration or at other times (in the winter). We did not record it in these locations later in the winter. Chandran *et al.* (2016) state that the 'Eurasian Scops Owl, if at all it occurs, may be limited as a rare passage migrant to western India'. While it would not be proper for us to speculate about the distribution of this species in Gujarat based on these three sightings, we can confirm that there is no doubt that it does occur here. It can be said that these sightings indicate that the Eurasian Scops Owl is probably a rare autumn passage migrant in Gujarat and not a winter visitor. But, more data is needed to make any assessment regarding its status here.

The Eurasian Scops Owl might be overlooked due to its similarities with other *Otus* owls. Even though its distinctive call

helps in identification, we observed that it was not very vocal during the time we watched it here. It is possible that during migration, it does not call frequently and is usually silent. This could create problems in correctly identifying it in the field. We request birdwatchers here to look very carefully for this owl in suitable habitat during the autumn migration period.

**Acknowledgments**

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