

AN EFFORT TO SAVE THE ENIGMATIC OWLS IN INDIA

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

Illustration of Eastern Grass owl by Richa Kedia | Photo Credit: Richa Kedia

Owls are one of the most enigmatic creatures of the wild. These nocturnal hunters are often found in illegal wildlife trade in India due to various superstitions and taboos attached to them. Despite their immense role in the ecosystem, these endangered birds are trapped in large numbers for sacrifice and use in multiple rituals often promoted by local mystic practitioners. To highlight common threats and for effective identification of owls, TRAFFIC and WWF-India launched an identification tool recently. TRAFFIC was established in 1976 by WWF and IUCN as a wildlife trade monitoring network to undertake data collection, analysis, and provision of recommendations to inform decision making on wildlife trade. Identification (ID) cards have been issued to enable law enforcement authorities to accurately identify 16 commonly-found owl species in illegal trade. The ID cards, in English and Hindi, will be distributed free to wildlife law enforcement agencies across India. "India is home to about 36 species of owls, all protected under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. However, very little information is available on the status of species level counts, thus making them vulnerable. Through the identification tool, we wanted to highlight the need to protect these enigmatic creatures and assist officials and other organisations working for conservation in identification of owl species," says Merwyn Fernandes, Coordinator, TRAFFIC's India office. Not just the hunting, trading, or any other form of utilization of owls is a punishable offense as per the provisions of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972; all owl species found in India are enlisted under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which restricts their international trade. According to reports, at least 20 seizure incidences related to poaching and trafficking of owls have been reported across India since 2019. But many more go unreported, say experts. Authored by Saket Badola, Head of TRAFFIC's India office and Merwyn, the new ID tools provide essential information related to the species' legal status, habitat, and distribution. They provide valuable tips on identifying the owls at species level and highlight common threats. The owl species in the ID cards are Asian Barred Owlet, Barn Owl, Brown Fish Owl, Brown Hawk Owl, Brown Wood-owl, Collared Owlet, Collared Scops-owl, Dusky Eagle Owl, Eastern Grass-owl, Jungle Owlet, Mottled Wood-owl, Oriental Scops-owl, Rock Eagle-owl, Spot-bellied Eagle-owl, Spotted Owlet and Tawny Fish-owl.

The ID card is in a form of a downloadable booklet which has illustrations of the owls, the key features of each species, its distribution in India and its size comparison with the house sparrow and crow for easy identification.

The illustrations of the 16 owl species were done in watercolour by Richa Kedia. Speaking about the experience of recreating the scientific images through illustrations, Richa says, "Owls being nocturnal creatures, the most challenging part is to get the colouration of the species right as night images rarely bring out the exact appearance of the species. I had to rely on several books and sources to get the perfect colouration of each species." Her main focus was to make the eyes, beak, ears and claws of each owl species prominent. "I believe Illustrations have a greater impact when it comes to identification or spreading awareness about a species as you can create it from scratch with focus on body parts which are critical for identification purpose," says Richa, who specialises in wildlife illustrations and has worked with AP Forest Department as well as Indira Gandhi Zoological Park in spreading awareness on lesser-known species like small cats of the region. According to Saket, the main strategies to recover key wildlife species is to provide them a safe habitat and protect them from the threats of poaching and illegal trade. "Protecting owls will support ecosystem restoration and biodiversity," he says. Ravi Singh,

secretary general and CEO, WWF-India, adds, "Owls play an essential role in our ecosystem. They enhance agricultural productivity by keeping a check on the rodent populations. Unless trafficking and illicit trade of owls is controlled, the owl populations will remain under threat. Adequate conservation and protection efforts for owls and other endangered species is crucial for maintaining a healthy ecosystem". *The owl identification tool comes in a PDF format and can be downloaded from <https://www.wwfindia.org/?20662/strengthening-owl-protection-in-india>*

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