



An old mango tree in farmland with natural cavity open to the sky is a typical nest site of the Mottled Wood Owl.



A pair of Mottled Wood Owls roosting on an Acacia tree during the day time.

- **Distribution:** Entire peninsular India; not in NE India and Sri Lanka.
- **Habit:** Arboreal.
- **Habitat:** Sparsely wooded plain country, amidst cropland with groves of mango, tamarind, and banyan, often near village outskirts. These owls avoid dense forests and mountains.

- **Behaviour:** Keep in pairs and perch silently during the day in the dense canopy of tall trees or in *Acacias*. Utter mellow hoot at dawn and dusk. Become quite vocal during the breeding season, when they give a variety of calls including screeches. Will fly even during the daytime if disturbed.

- **Food:** Rats, mice, small bats, birds (bulbul, white-eye, house sparrow, sunbird, blue rock pigeon), small reptiles (geckos and lizards), scorpions, crabs, mollusks and insects. Prey is killed and swallowed whole.

Few prey items of this carnivorous owl:



Gerbil.



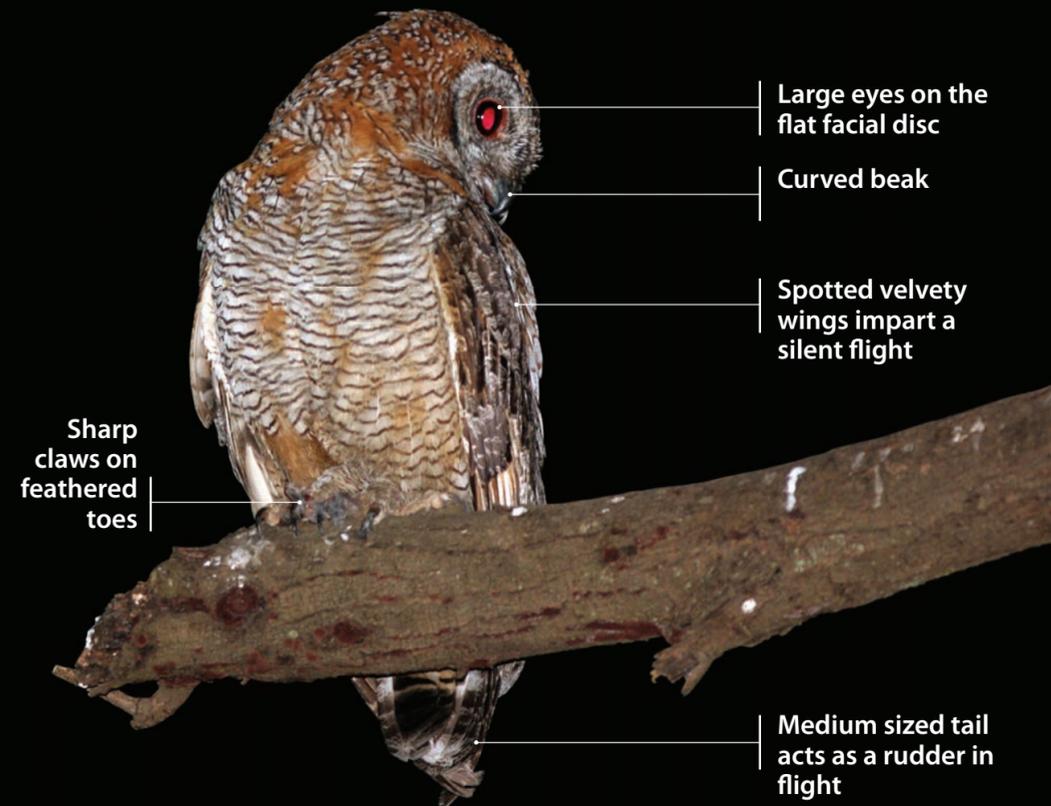
House Sparrow.



Oriental White-eye.



Lizard.



Incubating female and white oval eggs in the tree cavity nest amidst wood shavings.



Two days old hatchlings.



Two weeks old nestling.



Three and a half weeks old chicks.

GLIMPSES OF THE SECRET LIFE



Regurgitating the pellet - a rare moment!!



Nictitating membrane protects the eyes.



An owl sculpture on a column in a Buddhist cave at Pandavlene near Nashik.

- **Etymology:** Latin *Strix*, screech owl; L. *ocellatus*, marked with eyelets, ocellated feathers. (Pande, Satish (2009). Latin Names of Indian Birds Explained. BNHS, OUP.)

- **Cultural aspects:** This owl is called *Tamroluka* in Sanskrit literature, meaning one with brown plumage. It is also aptly called *Raktalochan*, one with blood-red eyes. The eyelids of this owl have a unique, fine, coral red or pinkish rim.



An occupied nest with the adult peeping out during the night.



Adult leaving the nest after feeding the four weeks old chick in the nest hollow.

- **Nest site:** A peculiar natural tree hollow opening on the top, both in live trees or in snags.
- **Nest:** No nesting material is added. The owls nibble the walls of tree hollows, hence wooden shavings and debris are often found in the nests which may be infested with wood-lice. Rarely the owls may build stick nests.
- **Brood:** One to three.





The nocturnal owls are at a risk of electrocution due to such tangles of live power lines on electricity poles in our rural areas

- **Threats:** Immature birds and brooding females are often molested by crows. Tree felling is disastrous for these owls since they need large natural tree hollows that are formed only in old trees. Pesticide use leads to reduction in food such as mice. The owls are victims of superstitious beliefs, being hunted for demand in black magic. They are trapped for illicit trade till date.

- **Protection:** Hunting or trapping of this owl is prohibited by Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act.

- **How can I help?** The role of this owl as the destroyer of crop vermin needs to be emphasized to children and farmers. The false



beliefs and superstitious notions need to be addressed with scientific data illustrating the agronomic importance of this owl to man. The known nest sites should be identified and old trees should be protected by peoples participation. Plantation of indigenous trees like banyan, tamarind, mango and other *ficus* and large trees should be undertaken.



Owl chicks are sometimes found during tree cutting when the nest sites in tree hollows are destroyed. Such rescued chicks can be kept in artificial nest boxes and relocated on the same tree. The parents accept the chicks which eventually fledge to freedom.



Mottled Wood Owl

- **Order:** Strigiformes ● **Family:** Strigidae
- **Status:** Endemic to India

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Amazing Facts:



The large ears of owls are hidden under the feathers at the edge of the facial disc which serve as focusing devices for the incident sound waves. The ears are unevenly placed on the face and hence the owls accurately locate the origin of the sound at night.



The eye shine, which is a source of fear for the common man is actually the light that reflects from the shiny sub-retinal layer called tapetum lucidum. This augments the low light that falls in the eyes of the owls during the night.



The neck of the owl has a high degree of mobility in both the vertical and horizontal axes. This is due to a special joint between the skull and the first cervical vertebra - the atlas. Here, the owl is seen rotating the head at an amazing speed, to shake off the rain water during the monsoon. Photo taken at 1/60th sec shutter speed freezes the 'spinning top' action.



Brown Wood Owl *Strix leptogrammica*.



Hume's Owl *Strix butleri*.



Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*.

Related Owls:

The owls of the genus *Strix* lack ear tufts; facial disc is well developed extending equally above and below the eyes; tarsi and toes are feathered, and irides are usually dark.

FACT FILE: Mottled Wood Owl *Strix ocellata* Lesson, 1839

Pingat Vanaghubad (Marathi), Girnari Ghuvad (Gujarati), Kollikukuravan (Malyalam).

- **Type Locality:** Pondicherry.
- **Races:** *Strix ocellata ocellata* in peninsular India; *S. o. griseocens* in Madhya Pradesh and Orissa and *S. o. grandis* in Saurashtra peninsula.
- **Length:** 48 cm.
- **Wing:** 320-357 cm (Male & Female)
- **Weight:** 680 – 770 g.
- **Sexual Maturity:** After 2 years.
- **Breeding Season:** November to April.
- **Clutch:** 1 to 3 eggs once in a year. No replacement clutch is laid.
- **Eggs:** 5.11 cm x 4.26 cm. Creamy white, ovoid.
- **Incubation:** Only by female. 30 - 32 days.
- **Life span:** Not known.
- **Status: Endemic to India.**



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- *Satish Pande, Saleel Tamble, Niranjan Sant, Clement Francis M. (2003). Birds of Western Ghats, Kokan and Malabar, including birds of Goa. BNHS and OUP.
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