

Acknowledgements

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Diet of the Spotted Owlet *Athene brama* in an urban landscape

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Abstract: We aimed to study the food habits of the Spotted Owlet *Athene brama* by combining the pellet analysis as well as direct/visual observation methods. Both methods were used simultaneously for seven months. Direct observations were carried out by visually monitoring the owlets for 214 days, over 642 hrs. All events of feeding were recorded, and prey identified using relevant field guides. 70 pellets were collected from the roosting site of the same owl pair, treated, and further analysed for remains of prey items. A total of 11 prey orders were recorded by both the methods. Out of these, 3 orders were detected only by pellet analysis, 5 orders were detected only by direct observations, and 3 orders were detected by both the methods. Common Indian toads, cicadas, and wasps were some new prey taxa/items detected by us during this study. As each of the followed method has its own advantages as well as limitations, we combined both the methods to obtain a more reliable dietary of this species.

Introduction

The Spotted Owlet *Athene brama* is a common nocturnal raptor, widely distributed throughout the Indian Subcontinent and abundant, especially, around human habitation (Ali & Ripley 1983; Ali 2002). Owls are known to play an important role in the bio-control of pests (Santhanakrishnan *et al.* 2011). Considerable work has been done regarding the dietary analysis of the Spotted Owlet from various geographical areas including India (Jain & Advani 1983; Kumar 1985; Jadhav & Parasharya 2003; Pande *et al.* 2004; Santhanakrishnan *et al.* 2011; Zade

et al. 2011), and neighbouring countries like Pakistan (Beg *et al.* 1990; Shah *et al.* 2004). All the aforementioned studies have used only one method in the analysis of the owl's dietary: study of regurgitated pellets. Our aim was to determine its dietary using both methods, pellet analysis and direct observation, simultaneously.

Study area & methods

The present study was carried out in the campus of Fergusson College, Pune (18°31'N, 73°50'E; 570 m asl). A combination of



Fig. 1. Map of study area. Monitored roosting sites are marked with red circles.

methods was used to understand the dietary composition of the study species—we combined the popularly used pellet analyses technique with direct observations to obtain a reliable qualitative dietary composition of the Spotted Owllet. The study was carried out for a total of 214 days from 01 April 2012 to 31 October 2012. The roosting/nesting sites of the owllets monitored are given in Fig. 1.

Direct observation

We monitored two pairs of Spotted Owllet adults and their juveniles (from approximately 20 days of hatching out) for seven months to document opportunistic dietary records. A pilot study for obtaining direct observations revealed that the maximum frequency of feeding occurs between 1830 hrs and 2130 hrs. Hence, the observations were made from 1830 hrs to 2130 hrs (total effort=642 hrs) using a pair of binoculars and torches. Juveniles were tracked following their distinct call. All events of foraging by adults or by the adult/s to the juvenile/s were visually observed and photographed (Pic XX1). Prey was identified based on morphological characters which were evident in the field and from the photographs we clicked, after consulting Daniel (2002), and Daniels (2011) for reptiles and amphibians, and Distant (1906), and Mani (2004) for insects; these were also validated by consulting experts in the field.

Pellet analysis

Additionally, 70 freshly regurgitated pellets were also collected from below two roosting/nesting sites of the same owllet families, packed in polythene bags, and labelled for further identification. The pellets were treated in a hot air oven at 70°C for 24 hrs for eliminating any associated invertebrates and were further treated with 8% NaOH (Sodium Hydroxide). The prey items were identified following Talmale & Pradhan (2009) for rodents, Asokan *et al.* (2009) for insect orders, and for other vertebrate

Table 1: List of prey items identified in Spotted Owllet pellets during the study period

No.	Date 2012	Time [hrs]	Prey item				Total no. of prey items detected		Eaten by Juveniles / Adults	
			Order	Family	Genus	Species	Common name	Direct obs.		Pellet analysis
1	19 April 14 May	2115 2025	Anura	Bufo	<i>Bufo (=Duttaphrynus)</i>	<i>melanostictus*</i>	Common Indian Toad	02	–	Juvenile
2	17 April–12 May	1900–2030	Homoptera	Cicadidae*	Unidentified	Unidentified	Cicada	147	–	Juvenile
3	01 September	1920	Hymenoptera	Vespidae*	<i>Vespa</i>	Unidentified	Wasp	03	–	Adult
4	09 May–19 July	–	Hymenoptera	Formicidae	<i>Campanotus</i>	Unidentified	Carpenter ant	–	15	Unknown
5	17 April–30 October	–	Coleoptera	Scarabaeidae	Unidentified	Unidentified	Beetle	16	55	Adult
6	17 May	1940	Blattodea	Blattidae	<i>Periplaneta</i>	Unidentified	Cockroach	02	–	Juvenile
7	13 May–12 June	1900–2100	Squamata	Geckkonidae	<i>Hemidactylus</i>	Unidentified	House gecko	07	06	Adult & Juveniles
8	15 May 05 April	1942	Squamata	Agamidae	<i>Calotes</i>	<i>versicolor</i>	Garden Lizard	02	–	Adult
9	22 April	1935	Scolopendromorpha	Unidentified	Unidentified	Unidentified	Centipede	01	–	Adult & Juveniles
10	05 May 18 May 24 May 17 July 02 October	–	Orthoptera	Unidentified	Unidentified	Unidentified	Grasshopper	–	05	Unknown
11	01 May	1915	Isoptera	Unidentified	Unidentified	Unidentified	Termites	07	–	Juveniles
12	20 June 23 July	–				Threads		–	✓	Unknown
13	24 April 27 April 25 May	–				Plant mater (seeds/fibres)		–	✓	Unknown
14	20–25 May	–	Rodentia	Muridae	<i>Mus</i>	sp.	House mouse	–	11	Unknown
15	08 June–11 August	–	Soricomorpha	Soricidae	<i>Suncus</i>	<i>murinus</i>	Asian house shrew	–	07	Unknown

* Prey taxa/items reported for the first time by this study.

Note: For number of prey items calculated in pellet analysis, one item corresponds to remains of that prey item found in one pellet. Whereas, for direct observation, one item corresponds to one entire intact prey species that is photographed. Thus, one pellet may contain remains of more than one individual of that prey species though it is counted as one.

prey, museum specimens (Zoology Department, Fergusson College) from the same area were referred. Experts of respective taxa were also consulted for identification.

Results

We recorded a total of 286 prey items belonging to 11 Orders using both the methods (Table 1). Out of these, 3 Orders were detected only through pellet analysis, 5 Orders only by direct observations, and 3 were detected by both the methods.

Common Indian Toad *Duttaphrynus melanostictus* in the diet of spotted owllet

Kumar (1985) reported the occurrence of anurans (=frogs) for the first time in the diet of Spotted Owllet. To date, only Jadhav & Parasharya (2003) have recorded presence of the toad *Bufo stomaticus* (= *D. stomaticus*) in the diet of this owllet.

We observed the following series of events on the aforementioned date:

At 2115 hrs an adult owllet successfully attacked a toad that was foraging for insects near a lamp-post. At 2117 hrs, it fed the injured toad to one of the juveniles that was perched on a branch. The juvenile immediately grasped the toad in its claws and started to feed on its head. By 2125 hrs the toad was completely ingested [58].

On 14 May 2012 we observed a similar series of events in the same area and by the same owllet pair. Based on our observations, it appears that Spotted Owllet can feed on *Bufo* (= *Duttaphrynus*) *sp.*, and as suggested by Jadhav & Parasharya (2003), the poison glands on the toad's skin do not affect the owllet.

Rubber band in the diet of Spotted Owllet

On analyzing the pellet collected on 17 July 2012, we found a greenish elastic material entangled in the crushed matter of other prey. On further dissection and clearing, it was identified as a 2 mm thick rubber band. The band was intact to a greater extent and had minor scraping marks [59]. Such artificial materials in



58. Spotted Owllet feeding on Common Indian Toad



59. Rubber band in owllet pellet



60. Spotted owllet feeding on Cicadidae nymph

an owllet's pellet indicate two possibilities: Direct ingestion of the material mistaking it for its natural prey, or indirect ingestion by feeding on rodents or other prey that had ingested the artificial material.

Cicadidae and *Vespa* species in the diet of the Spotted Owllet

We also recorded the occurrence of family Cicadidae (order Homoptera) in the diet of the Spotted Owllet juveniles [60]. Specimens from the same area were identified based on morphological characters following the keys provided by Distant (1906). It was observed that for their juveniles, the adult owllets preferred to hunt freshly moulted nymphs of Cicadidae that were present on the vertical surfaces of rocks, old walls, and tree trunks, probably due to the soft nature of the nymphs. Similarly, *Vespa* species (order Hymenoptera) in the diet of the adult owllets was also observed by us.

Discussion

Both the methods followed in this study have their own advantages and disadvantages. Pellet analysis is considered to be a reliable and non-invasive method for dietary analysis of insectivorous birds (Ralph *et al.* 1985). Prey items that have soft body parts (like insect nymphs) are easily digested and consequently no remains are left in pellets. Hence pellet analysis cannot detect such prey (Lewis *et al.* 2004). Also, as the matter in pellets is crushed to a great degree (Zade *et al.* 2011), pellet analysis can detect insect prey items mostly upto the level of Order. Whereas, direct observation method is highly labour intensive (Lewis *et al.* 2004) but can sometimes facilitate identification of prey at Genus level. Hence recent studies (Simmons *et al.* 1991; Redpath *et al.* 2001; Jathar & Rahmani 2004; Lewis *et al.* 2004; Margalida *et al.* 2005) have preferred a multi-method approach for dietary analysis of raptors. Due to the nocturnal habit of the bird and logistical constraints, the sampling for direct observation was restricted to three hours daily, which might have caused an observational bias in the present study.

The Spotted Owllet has adapted well in the urban landscape and this is indicated by its habit of using electric wires (Ali & Santhanakrishnan 2013), or lamp-posts, as perches for foraging, and also roosting on man-made structures like wooden ledges. Majority of the Spotted Owllet's prey can be termed as household pests, as plant bugs, beetle larvae, rodents, termites, and ants cause considerable damage to trees, garden plants, or furniture (Pawar & Desai 2011). Use of artificial insecticides and pesticides against such pests has known to cause significant side-effects on human health and has also contributed to the deterioration of the environment (Casida & Quistad 1998). Entomophagous birds like the study species are known to play the role of effective bio-control agents against pests (Santhanakrishnan *et al.* 2011; Kler & Kumar 2013).

Also, among all the Indian owl species, the Spotted Owllet is reported to have the highest frequency of occurrence in illegal trade across the country (Ahmed 2010). Hence, in spite of it being listed under 'Least Concern' (IUCN 2012), *in situ* conservation of this species is essential due to its aforementioned role in the urban ecosystem.

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