Distribution: Entire peninsular India; not in NE India and Sri Lanka.

Habit: Arboreal.

Habitat: Sparsely wooded plain country, arid or semiarid 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.

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 woodlice. Rarely the owls may build stick nests.

Brood: One to three.

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.

GLIMPSES OF THE SECRET LIFE

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

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

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

Regurgitating the pellet - a rare moment!!

Nictitating membrane protects the eyes.
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 pests is well known. The known nest sites need to be addressed with scientific data. Immature birds and brooding females are often molested and molesters need to be emphasized to children and farmers. The false beliefs and superstitious notions need to be addressed with scientific data. Protection: Hunting or trapping of this owl is prohibited by Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act.

As 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.

The Mottled Wood Owl (Strix ocellata) is found in the forests of India. It is a nocturnal hunter and relies on its hearing and vision to locate prey. The owl’s large ears are hidden under the feathers, allowing it to hear sounds from the ground. The owl’s eyes are adapted for night vision, and it has a layer called tapetum lucidum in its eyes that reflects light back into the retina, enhancing its ability to see in low light conditions.

The Mottled Wood Owl is a medium-sized owl with a brownish-gray plumage and distinctive ear tufts. It is found in a variety of habitats, including forested areas, plantations, and gardens. The owl’s diet consists of small mammals, birds, and reptiles. It is an important predator in its ecosystem, helping to control rodent populations.

Conservation efforts are crucial for the preservation of the Mottled Wood Owl, as its habitat is threatened by deforestation, urbanization, and human activities. Conservation programs should focus on reducing habitat loss, protecting critical nesting sites, and raising awareness about the importance of this species. Working with local communities and promoting sustainable practices can help in the conservation of the Mottled Wood Owl and its habitat.