

Festival of lights casts shadow over owls in India: TRAFFIC urges strong action to curb their illegal trade and sacrifice



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Amidst Diwali celebrations every year in India owls are trapped and sacrificed for tantric rituals and ceremonial *pujas*. While the exact number of owls traded each year domestically is unknown, estimates place the figure in the thousands with anecdotal reports indicating the increasing scarcity of wild species."

Owls occupy a prime place in the religious space in India as they are considered as vahana (vehicle) of Laxmi, the Hindu Goddess of Wealth. Yet, they are targeted by occult practitioners for the certain tantric rituals for which they are collected from the wild and traded across the country. This trade specially peaks around the festival of Diwali.

With, the festival approaching on 7th November this year, TRAFFIC warns of a possible increase in trafficking and owl sacrifices throughout the country and calls for stronger wildlife law enforcement actions to curb illegal trade and trafficking.



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OWLS IN INDIA

There are more than 200 species of owls found in the world. In India alone, there are around 30 species of owls. Owls are predatory birds, characterised by large forward-facing eyes surrounded by a facial disk of short stiff feathers and an upright posture.

A large proportion of owls are nocturnal. While some owls make their home in the hollow of trees, others may nest in an empty barn, abandoned building or a rocky area. Many species are resident, but others are nomadic, wandering and settling wherever there is plentiful food.

Owls play a vital role in local ecosystems, not least by benefitting farmers by preying on small rodents and other crop pests.

LEGAL STATUS

Under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 of India, the Forest Owlet *Athene blewitti* is listed under Schedule I of while all other owl species are covered under Schedule IV. Thus, any trapping, killing and trade in these species is strictly prohibited and invites strict penalties under the Act. All owl species found in India are listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The Forest Owlet is in Appendix I and all other Indian species in Appendix II of the Convention that restricts international trade in wildlife.

ILLEGAL TRAFFICKING AND TRADE OF OWLS IN INDIA

TRAFFIC's report on illegal owl trade in India titled "*Imperilled Custodians of the Night*" released in 2010 had highlighted many concerns regarding capturing and trade of owls in India for black magic, street performances, taxidermy, private aviaries/zoos, food, use in folk medicines, capturing other birds, use of claws and feathers in making headgear, and eggs which are often used for gambling.

The report had also highlighted the illegal trapping and trade that peaks around Diwali festival month especially in Northern India. The occult practitioners misguide their customers by making unsubstantiated claims about the efficacy of owl parts for several unproven purposes ranging from curing various illnesses to fighting effects of evil spirits. These birds are poached for their bones, talons, skulls, feathers, meat and blood, which are then used in talismans, black magic and traditional medicine. Owls, especially with "ears" (tufts) are thought to possess the greatest magical powers with Diwali claimed to be the most auspicious time for owl sacrifices.



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Of the 30 species of owls found in India, 15 have been found in illegal wildlife trade. The Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*, Barn Owl *Tyto alba* and Rock Eagle-Owl *Bubo bengalensis* are the most commonly recorded species. As a result of this illegal capture and trade, the population of owl is believed to be severely declining in the country.



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Uttar Pradesh is reported to be one of the major hubs for illegal trade activity during Diwali. An analysis of seizure data over a period of several years showed that Lucknow, Agra, Kanpur and Allahabad are some of the most important hubs for owl trade. Other than the infamous Lucknow bird market, some major hubs for illegal bird trade were also found in Delhi including the Pigeon market (locally known as the Kabootar Bazaar), situated near Red Fort in Old Delhi.

As the practice of sacrificing of owl begins with the start of Dussehra festival, moving onto Diwali, the poachers involved with bird trade are at their most active during this time, exploiting the opportunity for poaching and illegal trade. Hence this is the prime time for enforcement agencies in these areas to remain alert and increase vigilance to keep a check on illegal owl trade.

Spotted Owlet is amongst the most traded owl species in the country. Reports have indicated that an increased demand for Spotted Owlets throughout the Delhi Market has resulted in the extensive trapping of birds from nearby areas, particularly Meerut and Lucknow.

Rock Eagle-Owl is also a commonly recorded species in the illegal owl trade. Horned owls such as the Rock Eagle-Owls are particularly sought after by tantrics and other practitioners, as their false feather ear-tufts are considered to hold mystical properties within them making these birds a common target for poachers.

Moreover, the demand for horned owls is such that sometimes Spotted Owlets are also disguised to look like them. They are dyed with tea and lamp-black mixed with mustard oil and feathers are stuck with latex to the head, besides red colouring agents being injected into the eyes of the bird.

Barn Owl is considered the second most commonly observed species of owl in trade. The dead specimens are sometimes displayed by mendicants on the roadside, especially in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, whereas the live Barn Owls were recorded from Lucknow bird market in Uttar Pradesh, followed by Delhi, Kolkata in West Bengal and Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh. The eyeballs, skin and the feather roots of Barn Owls were often used for the preparation of medicines by traditional healers.

Download the TRAFFIC's report "*Imperilled Custodians of the Night*" at

<https://www.traffic.org/site/assets/files/3160/imperilled-custodians-of-the-night-1.pdf>

CALL FOR ACTION

TRAFFIC's advisory is a strong reminder of the illegal trade and sacrifice of owls in India that peaks around the festival of Diwali. Therefore, TRAFFIC urges the following action to combat this threat and secure the future of owls in India.

1. Enhanced vigilance and enforcement actions by law enforcement agencies near owl habitats and forest areas.
2. Conducting regular checks on the bird trade markets to monitor any incidence of illegal trade in owl species.
3. Enhanced cooperation among various enforcement agencies for a collaborative action against inter-state smuggling and illegal bird trade.
4. Spreading awareness about the role of owls in our ecosystem and the need for their conservation among general public.

Links to news report of owls in illegal wildlife trade in India in the last few years as reported in open sources:

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/chhatbir-on-alert-after-owls-stolen-from-bathinda-zoo/articleshow/65882497.cms>;

<https://citytoday.news/attempt-to-sell-owls-two-arrested/>;

www.newindianexpress.com/states/karnataka/2018/jun/07/inter-state-racket-in-trading-of-eagle-owls-busted-in-karnataka-1824856.html;

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/barn-owl-rescued-from-gurgaon-bungalow/articleshow/64432785.cms>;

<http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=oct1817/state050>;

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/Six-held-for-trying-to-sell-wild-owl-leopard-skin/article17081789.ece>;

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/palghar-professor-rescues-injured-eagle-owl-from-poachers/story-8xAgR4ongI9WojpzcLzJdO.html>;

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/agra/Indian-eagle-owl-falls-prey-to-superstition-rescued-in-Agra/articleshow/53794319.cms>;

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/caught-on-camera-illegal-sale-of-owls-before-diwali-in-old-delhi/story-S5QeOEeABxtASJnY46IqTJ.html>;

<http://www.mid-day.com/articles/191-birds-bats-rescued-from-residence-of-animal-lover/15197087>

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TRAFFIC
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