

Illegal trade, trapping and utilisation of owls in India: FACTSHEET
(Based on TRAFFIC's India Office's investigation released through a report
"Imperilled Custodians of the Night" in 2010)

1. How many species of owl have been recorded in illegal bird trade in India?

India is home to 30 species of owls of which 13 were recorded by this study in the domestic live bird trade, while two more species were reported in trade through seizure data.

2. What role do owls play in our ecosystem?

Owls feed on small mammals, birds, frogs, lizards, and insects and are at the apex of the food chain. As prime consumers of rodents such as mice and rats, owls can be very beneficial to humans. The importance of owls to agricultural communities has led to the birds being incorporated into the rituals of farmers.

3. Which legislations govern the owl trade?

Forest Owllet *Heteroglaux blewitti* is listed in Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 of India while all the other owl species in India are listed under the Schedule IV of the Act, under the family names Tytonidae and Strigidae. The Act prohibits hunting and domestic trade in the species. The international trade in owls is regulated by the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Forest Owllet is placed in Appendix I of CITES while all other owl species found in India are listed in Appendix II, restricting international trade in these species.

4. What drives the owl trade in India?

Use of owls in black magic and sorcery linked with superstition, totems, and taboos drives the illegal trade of owls in India. Shaman or black magic practitioners, frequently referred to as *tantrics* in India, prescribe the use of parts from live owls such as skull, feathers, ear tufts, claws, heart, liver, kidney, blood, eyes, fat, beak, tears, eggshells, meat, and bones for ceremonial *pujas* and rituals. (*For details of the parts of owls used in various occult practices, please refer to the report*).

5. What are the 13 species observed in owl trade?

Spotted Owllet *Athene brama*, Barn Owl *Tyto alba*, Rock Eagle-owl *Bubo bengalensis*, Jungle Owllet *Glaucidium radiatum*, Collared Scops-owl *Otus bakkamoena*, Brown Fish-owl *Ketupa zeylonensis*, Dusky Eagle-Owl *Bubo coromandus*, Mottled Wood-owl *Strix ocellata*, Asian Barred Owllet *Glaucidium cuculoides*, Collared Owllet *Glaucidium brodiei*, Brown Wood-owl *Strix leptogrammica*, Oriental Scops-owl *Otus sunia* and Eastern Grass-owl *Tyto longimembri*.

6. Which are the most preferred species in trade?

The top five most preferred species of owls by traders are Rock Eagle-owl, Brown Fish-owl, Dusky Eagle-owl, Collared Scops-owl and Mottled Wood-owl.

7. Where does trapping of owl take place in India?

In the order of highest to lowest: Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh/Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh/Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Gujarat/Uttarakhand

8. Which are the main owl trading centres in India?

In the order of highest to lowest: Uttar Pradesh/Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal/Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Gujarat and Rajasthan/Bihar.

9. Which tribes/communities are involved in illegal trapping and trade of owls in India?

Bahelias, Mirshikar, Phasiya/Shikaris, Bhatiyara, Pathami or Jabjalies, Hakkipukki, Kuruvikkara/Amblakaran/Narikurava, Kalandars, Vagri, Pardis/Pashe-pardi, Lodies and Harries, Bawarias, Yanadi, Lambadas and Yerukula, Kalbaleyas/Jogis or Badiya, Karori or Kurmi, Damora, Bhil and Munda, Garo, Karbi and other north-eastern tribes.

10. Besides black magic, what are owls trapped and traded for in India?

- The Kalandars are well known for training Sloth Bears *Mellursus ursinus* for street performances have been moving away from their traditional vocation due to the fear of persecution, and in turn have started using owls for street performances, particularly in small towns and villages.
- Owls are also trapped, killed, and stuffed to be sold as zoological specimens for schools, colleges, and museums.
- Various tribes such as Baheliya, Kurmi-bahelias, Karbi, and Badiya communities are known to eat owls. This practise is more popular in villages.
- Owls are also killed and their body parts are used or sold for folk medicines. The feathers, bones, and claws are considered an important ingredient for medicines.
- Many species of owls are also used as decoy birds that are used to capture other birds.
- Owl feathers are used by Nishi/Wancho tribes in Arunachal Pradesh in their traditional headgear
- Live owls are also used to fight against Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrines* as a form of entertainment in a few places in India