

The Story of the Discovery of Karthala Scops Owl

THE scientific cataloguing of global avian diversity spans nearly two and a half centuries. Simply put, the endeavour seeks to create a definitive, universally accepted list of bird species that inhabit our exquisite planet, each meticulously assigned a precise scientific nomenclature. This monumental task is far from complete; it remains a dynamic process that will stretch far into the future. The process of taxonomic classification is an inherently intricate one-rife with complexities, misjudgements, and varying perspectives that call for continual revision. As newer species of birds are discovered, catalogued and added, previous entries are then re-evaluated and adjusted based on rigorous research. Each update to this list makes it progressively more robust and scientifically precise — an accomplishment that brings immense satisfaction to bird enthusiasts and researchers alike.

Yet, the thrill of discovering a new bird is unique — a moment that weaves another name into the complex tapestry of our planet's avian diversity, enriching the world in subtle but profound ways. The stories of these discoveries are as compelling as our feathered friends themselves, and today I share one such tale.

In 1958, British ornithologist CW Benson embarked on an expedition to the Comoro Islands to commemorate the centenary of the British Ornithologists' Union. The Comoros, largely unexplored in terms of avian life, were a fitting site for such an expedition, with Benson leading the team. The Comoro Archipelago, nestled between Madagascar and the south-eastern coast of Africa, comprises four main islands — Grand Comoro, Mohéli, Anjouan, and Mayotte. Each island was meticulously surveyed.

One day, Benson was observing a nest near their camp, "La Convalescence," on Grand Comoro. The nest before him belonged to a species known as "Humboldt's Sunbird", and Benson approached it with the careful precision of a seasoned naturalist, studying the types of twigs woven into its structure. As he peered inside, he noted the delicate, smooth "lining" — a common avian technique designed to protect the fragile skin of the chicks from the harshness of twigs or the roughness of materials. What caught Benson's keen eye, however, was the unusual use of feathers from other birds woven into this "lining". Among them, one feather stood out — a striking specimen, unmistakably belonging to either an owl or a nightjar. A realisation dawned on him like sunrise, gradual but unstoppable. As if a veil lifted from his mind. The presence of an owl feather was curious in and of itself, as no owl species were known to inhabit Grand Comoro.



Karthala Scops Owl

Could this feather belong to a hitherto unknown owl species? The discovery set off a frenzy of nightly expeditions. Armed with a flashlight, Benson scoured the darkness, deeply attuned to any unusual bird calls. His search took him to the slopes of Mount Karthala, an active volcano that dominates Grand Comoro. And on the western slopes, at an elevation of approximately 1800 metres, he first heard an unfamiliar call — a sound that closely resembled a nightjar. Accompanied by Zuma, a 13-year-old local known for his extraordinary climbing skills, Benson finally managed to locate and capture the elusive bird. Zuma's precision and agility proved invaluable in the search that Benson decided to keep him with the team for the rest of the expedition.

To Benson's amazement, the bird was indeed an owl — a previously unrecorded species of Scops Owl, which he christened the "Karthala Scops Owl". At first, Benson's colleagues were sceptical of his claim, disputing the idea that it could be a new species. Two of his team members believed it was merely a sub-species of the "Madagascar Scops Owl", and in a rather inscrutable decision, it was catalogued as such.

Decades later, however, extensive research from 1999 to 2008 confirmed that the Karthala Scops Owl was indeed a distinct species. It was, as Benson discovered, a *sui generis*. Quite strangely, because of some unexplained oversight, the owl's scientific name bypassed due tribute to Benson, instead honouring the French zoologist Paulian, and was officially classified as *Atus rutilus pauliani*. Paulian worked extensively on the birds and mammals of the Indian Ocean and contributed greatly to that expedition. Nonetheless, Benson's pivotal role as the discoverer has since been recognised in the annals of ornithological history.

The Karthala Scops Owl faces a grave existential threat sixty years after its discovery. Beyond the slopes of Mount Karthala, its habitat has shrunk dramatically amidst encroaching settlements, agricultural expansion, and roadways. Conservationists estimate that just a thousand pairs remain confined to this volcanic peak. Benson's remarkable owl now resides as a specimen in the British Natural History Museum, preserved as both a testament to discovery and a sombre reminder of nature's fragility.

Contributed by Mr Samrat Sarkar.
Email: samratswagata1@gmail.com