

Survey to map state's owl diversity

SUBHAJOY ROY

Calcutta: Revered as harbingers of good fortune in many households yet often persecuted because of superstition, owls — the enigmatic birds of the night — are now at the centre of an effort by birdwatchers to map their presence across Bengal.

The survey will cover 100 locations not usually visited to spot owls.

An organiser said birdwatchers were already familiar with locations where owls are regularly spotted. The exercise is instead focusing on areas not known to harbour owl populations, in an attempt to widen the search and discover new habitats inhabited by the birds.

"This will give a clearer picture about the distribution of owls in our state," said Sujan Chatterjee, the secretary of Birdwatchers' Society that is organising the survey

Population: Over 20 owl species recorded in Bengal

Common species:

Asian Barn Owl, Spotted Owlet, Brown Hawk Owl, Indian Scops Owl, Collared Scops Owl

CONSERVATION QUEST



Barn Owl



Brown Hawk Owl

Diet: Rodents, insects, small birds and lizards

Habitat: Orchards, old buildings and mature trees with hollows

Major threats: Felling of old trees and excessive pesticide use in agricultural fields

with WWF-India.

The Birdwatchers' Society selected 40 surveyors based on their knowledge of owls and experience in birdwatching.

"Unlike a bird count, where anyone can register and record sightings, an owl survey requires dedicated birdwatchers with a sound understanding of these nocturnal predators," said Chatterjee.

The survey will exclude forests and concentrate on urban and suburban landscapes, agricultural lands and forest edges.

The first leg of the survey

was done between January and mid-April. The second leg will be conducted between mid-August and December.

Different owl species emerge at different hours of the night, making timing a crucial aspect of the survey.

"Species such as the Spotted Owlet and the Barn Owl can often be seen around dusk. Others, like the Collared Scops-Owl, become active only when the surroundings have quietened and human activity has largely ceased for the day. To spot them, surveyors often have to remain in the field

well past 10pm," said Kanad Baidya, a member of the Birdwatchers' Society.

The survey aims to assess the diversity, abundance and behavioural ecology of owls across Bengal.

Birdwatchers said owls are a persecuted species. While Barn Owl (Lakshmi Pyancha in Bengali) is welcomed in households and their arrival is considered a good omen, the Brown Hawk Owl (Kal Pyancha in Bengali) is considered a bad omen. Brown Hawk Owls are killed in large numbers.

Birdwatchers said Asian

Barn Owls, especially the babies, are caught in great numbers. They are sold in markets and taken home for rituals. "You will often see young Asian Barn Owls with a *tilak* on their heads. This is because they are used in households during Puja," said Baidya.

The survey is being funded by WWF-India.

Dipankar Ghose, senior director (Biodiversity Conservation) at WWF-India, said these nocturnal birds play a crucial ecological role.

"They are brilliant nocturnal predators, feeding largely on rodents that would otherwise damage crops," Ghose told **Metro**.

"They are also important indicators of ecosystem health. The presence of these birds suggests a balanced ecosystem with healthy rodent populations and agricultural landscapes that face lower risks from rodent infestations," he said.