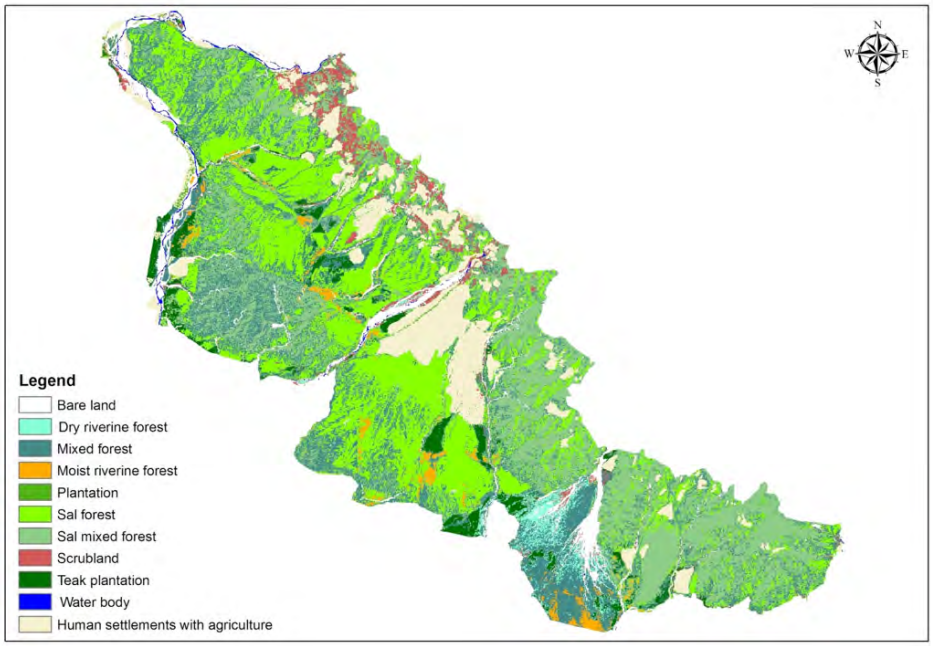
Sighting of Spot-bellied Eagle Owl *Bubo nipalensis* in Ramnagar Forest Division, Uttarakhand, India

Spot-bellied Eagle Owl in Ramnagar Forest Division, Uttarakhand

Owls are top vertebrate predators with 243 species distributed across the world (Gill & Donsker 2017). Besides being the bio-indicator of ecosystem health (Sergio et al. 2004), they are vital for broader, ecosystem-level conservation. Their conservation inherently protects many other species, habitats and ecological functions, yet they are in crisis. As many as seven species are Critically Endangered, 22 are Vulnerable, eight are Endangered, and 23 are Near Threatened as per the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN 2017). Habitat loss, pesticide use, vehicle collisions and illegal trade are some of the causes responsible for their decline and current status (Sergio et al. 2004; Ahmed 2010).

Owls are represented by two families, viz., Tyonidae (Barn owls) and Strigidae (Typical owls). The Strigidae, chiefly arboreal and nocturnal, occupy a wide assortment of ecological niches and are found all over the world from the Arctic to cool temperate regions of the southern hemisphere except Antarctica and some oceanic islands. A total of 223 known species inhabit woodlands, forest edges, hot deserts, bare mountains



Habitat types in Ramnagar Forest Division, Uttarakhand.

or grasslands. Their evolutionary status is not well-established but they are considered to be monophyletic in origin (Mahmood et al. 2014) and are closely related to Musophagidae and distantly related to Falconidae.

Spot-bellied Eagle Owl *Bubo nipalensis* is a large, nocturnal raptor, native to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Nepal, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Thailand, China, Cambodia, and India (Birdlife International 2016). In the Indian subcontinent, its distribution ranges from sub-montane tracts and lower Himalaya up to c. 2,100m from Kumaon eastwards through Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Assam Hills, north and south of Brahmaputra River, Nagaland, Manipur, and Bangladesh (Ali & Ripley 1981). Though the bird is resident, yet there are very few sighting reports of this species from different parts of India; Jaypal et al. (2005), Deshmukh (2008), Majumder et al. (2011) from Madhya Pradesh, Choudhary (2001) from Nagaland, Whistler & Kinnear (1935), Srinivasan (2013) from Andhra Pradesh. Occurrence of this species in Uttarakhand has only been reported from Goriganga Valley, Kumaon Himalaya (Tak & Sati 1994). Since then, several avifaunal surveys have been conducted covering its distribution range in Uttarakhand (Bhatt & Joshi 2011; Kidwai et al. 2013), however, the occurrence of the species has not been reported.

During vegetation survey on 14 May 2017, a Spot-bellied Eagle Owl was sighted in Ramnagar Forest Division (RFD), Uttarakhand (29.275^{0}N & 79.365^0"E). The owl was large, well camouflaged, brown with yellowish beak and two outwardly slanting erect black-and-white aigrettes or ear tufts above the head. Its breast was marked with crescentic more like heart-shaped spots. The bird was roosting on a *Holoptelea integrifolia* tree. On being disturbed, the bird flew and perched on a *Cassia fistula* tree. RFD encompasses an area 487km^2 and administratively divided into five forest rages. There are 11 major vegetation types; sal forest, sal mixed forest, mixed forest, teak plantation, scrubland, moist riverine forest, dry riverine forest, barren land, waterbody, agriculture with human habitation, and plantation. The

specimen was sighted in Kaladungi range near Hanuman temple in a dry riverine forest. The habitat around the sighting location was well wooded dominated by *Holoptelea integrifolia*, *Dulbergia sisso*, *Acacia catechu* with low occurrence of *Aegle marmelos*, *Ardina cordifolia*, and *Ehretia laevis*. The shrub layer is largely composed of *Lantana camara*, *Adathoda vasica*, *Colebrookea oppositifolia*, and *Murraya koenigii*. It was around 1,500m away from Kaladungi Town.

The species is essentially a forest dweller and spends the day drowsing on densely foliaged tree and does its hunting during the night within the forest (Ali & Ripley 1981). It is an opportunistic predatory species and is capable of preying upon Indian Peafowl, Jungle Fowl, Jackals, hare, fawns of Barking Deer, lizards, snakes, and fishes (Ali & Ripley 1981). The global population of the species has not been assessed and hence categorized as Least Concern under IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. In India too, the species has been listed under Schedule IV of Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, despite the fact that its sightings are not as common as of other sympatric species. Grimmett et al. (2006) commented on its probable presence in Uttarakhand as the region is within its distribution limits. Hence, current sighting is important as it confirms the presence of the species in Ramnagar Forest Division and opens up an opportunity to study the status of the species in order to ascertain its current conservation status.

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