

Eastern Grass Owl in Tinsukia District, Assam and its records in northeastern India



Eastern Grass Owl *Tyto longimembris* sighted in the Laina Village, Talap of Tinsukia District. © Imon Abedin.

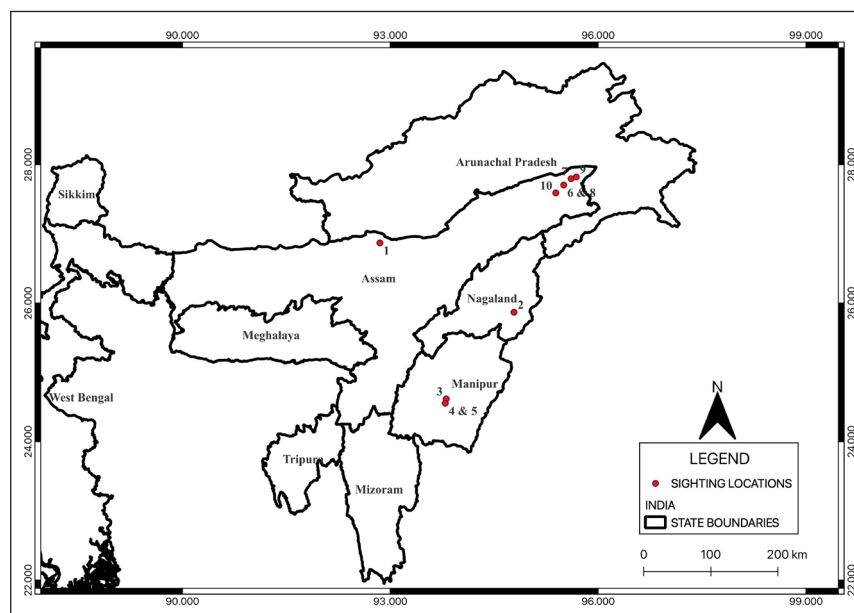
On 2 January, 2022, I went to the Talap area (27.7053 N & 95.5036 E, 120 m) of Tinsukia District, Assam, in search of the Eastern Grass Owl *Tyto longimembris*. At 1600 h, I arrived and began hiking over the grassland environment, crossing a stream on my approach to the location where the bird had been previously sighted. I waited for an hour till nightfall. Four birds suddenly took flight from the dense short grass and hovered over me for approximately two minutes before vanishing back into the impenetrable grasslands. With searchlights, I began looking for it in the vast grassland. I eventually located one bird resting on the floor

and photographed it after a brief search. I saw the individual for around three minutes using an 8x40 binocular and documented using a 400 mm lens without disturbing the bird.

I identified it as the Eastern Grass Owl *Tyto longimembris* also known as Australasian Grass Owl (Grimmett et al. 2011). It was similar in size and structure to a Barn Owl *Tyto alba*, with dark eyes and a whitish face and underparts. It had dark upperparts and contrasted more with the underparts than the Barn Owl *Tyto alba*, being more heavily marked with dark brown (especially on the crown and scapulars)

Table 1. List of sightings in northeastern India based on eBird and other sources

Sighting No.	Area	Year	Sighted by	Source
1	Near Nameri National Park, Assam	2016	Barooah, C. & L. Sarma	India Biodiversity Portal
2	Tsudowong, Nagaland	2019	Members of Pungro Area College Students' Union (Rescued)	East Mojo (Report by M. Ambrocia on 6.ii.2019)
3	Moirang, Manipur	30.i.2020	Munsi, E.	eBird
4	Loktak Lake, Bishnupur, Manipur	15.ii.2020	Thangaraj, H.	eBird
5	Loktak Lake, Bishnupur, Manipur	25.ii.2020	Sawant, S.	eBird
6	Laina Gaon, Talap, Tinsukia, Assam	2.x.2021 24.x.2021 28.xi.2021	Sonowal, A., A. Saha, A. Kothiala.	eBird
7	Saikhowa Ghat, Tinsukia, Assam	29.xi.2021	D'Souza, F.	eBird
8	Laina Gaon, Talap, Assam	2.i.2022	Abedin, I.	Author's Observation
9	Sadia, Assam	4.i.2022	Changmai, K. (Rescued)	Wildlife Trust of India & Forest Department, Assam
10	Baghjan, Assam	22.xii.2021	Changmai, K.	Wildlife Trust of India & Forest Department, Assam

Map showing all the sighting locations of Eastern Grass Owl *Tyto longimembris* in northeastern India.

and golden-buff (particularly on the nape). Further, it has dark barring on flight feathers, with a prominent golden-buff patch at the base of primaries

contrasting with the dark carpal patch and primary tips, and a dark-barred white or buff tail, which usually contrasts with the dark upper

tail-coverts. The legs were longer and only feathered halfway down the tarsus. The upperparts are mottled rather than streaked, while the bill is pale (Ali 1996).

The primary diet of the owl is found to be rodents, and it helps in the control of these pests significantly. This owl prefers tall grasslands and swamps. Roost areas consist of flattened vegetation within systems of “tunnels” through the swamp vegetation. Nesting is in a similar situation. It is considered the “Least Concern” globally, primarily because of its wide

distribution. Within Australia, it is considered Vulnerable under the New South Wales Threatened Species Conservation Act—1995 (Fitzgerald & Thorstensen 1992).

The Eastern Grass Owl *Tyto longimembris* is very rarely sighted in the country. In northeastern India, it is only known to have been sighted in the Bishnupur area of Manipur. But in recent years, there have been quite a number of sightings in Assam (especially in the Tinsukia District) and some other northeastern Indian states.

I also found two nests from prior years, as well as a fresh nest that will almost certainly be utilised for breeding this year. The existence of young suggests that the species has been able to reproduce effectively. This will also help to maintain the ecological balance of the local rodent population.

This was one of the most spectacular sightings of the year, and the bird is now frequently sighted. The growing number of birdwatchers

and the rise of avian tourism have greatly assisted in the discovery of these previously unknown species in the country's remote areas.

References

Ali, S. (1996). *The Book of Indian Birds* (12th ed.). Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai, 354 pp.

Fitzgerald, M. & C.R. Thorstensen (1992). A note on Eastern Grass Owl *Tyto longimembris* Diet From the north coast of New South Wales. *Corella* 18(3): 87–88.

Grimmett, R., C. Inskipp & T. Inskipp (2011). *Birds of Indian Subcontinent. 2nd ed.* Oxford University Press & Christopher Helm, London, 528 pp.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to: B. Hatibaruah and M. Sonowal for their assistance in identifying the bird in the field; all of the residents of Laina Village in Talap for their efforts in conserving the bird's habitat; and my parents for their continuous support throughout my life.

Imon Abedin

Department of Zoology, Gauhati University, Assam 781014, India.

Email: imon.jabedin@gmail.com

Citation: Abedin, I. (2023). Eastern Grass Owl in Tinsukia District, Assam and its records in northeastern India. Bird-o-soar #201, In: *Zoo's Print* 38(6): 20–22.