

## SHORT-EARED OWL (*ASIO FLAMMEUS*) IN KERALA, INDIA

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Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* (Pontoppidan, 1763) is a winter visitor to practically the entire Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka and Maldives (Ali & Ripley, 1987). Ali and Ripley (1987) also noted that the occurrence of the Short-eared Owl in different regions of the country is irregular and abundance is variable from year to year. According to Ali (1969), the Short-eared Owl is "not common" in Kerala. So far, the sightings of this bird from the State are few and far in between. The last, authentic sighting of the bird from Kerala was in 1933 during the course of the Travancore-Cochin ornithological survey by Salim Ali. During that survey, the Short-eared Owl specimen was collected on 23 February 1933 from Peermade (4000ft), Idukki District, Kerala (Ali & Whistler, 1936). Apart from the collected specimen, the bird was also sighted from Santhanpara (3500ft), Idukki District and Karupadanna, Thrissur District (ca. sea level), in Kerala during the survey (Ali & Whistler, 1936).

The species has then been reported from Mysore (Ali & Whistler, 1943), Madras (Thyagaraju, 1933; Santharam, 1981) and from Andhra Pradesh (Kanniah & Ganesh, 1995). Santharam (pers. comm.) has had about six sightings of Short-eared Owls from Adayar estuary, Madras between 1980 and 1984. The Short-eared Owl has also been observed miles out at sea between Kutch (Gujarat) and Bombay (McCann, 1936; Jamdar & Shrivastava, 1988). Short-eared Owl affects open undulating grassy country dotted with bushes, sparsely scrubbed hillsides, tall grassland on the margin of jheels, and also in semi-deserts. It is generally a species of low country, and may go up to 1400m (Ali & Ripley, 1987).

On 18 February 2001, during the course of a bird survey at Bharatapuzha Estuary (10°48'N and 59°E (sea level)), in Malappuram District, Kerala, we sighted a pair of these magnificent owls in one of the islets situated in the estuarine basin. Bharatapuzha, the second largest river in Kerala runs about 230km from its origin in the Western Ghats to the river mouth in Purathur,

Malappuram District, Kerala. Bharatapuzha is joined by Tirurpuzha just before it opens into the sea. During the low tide hours, a few sandy islets of cumulative area of about 25ha get exposed towards the river mouth. This area is dominated by bushes of Screw Pine (*Pandanus* sp.) and grasses. The river mouth is about 1km wide at the estuary and the entire area remains shallow throughout. The predominant bird communities here are waders and gulls.

The Short-eared Owl was sighted around 1130hr on 18 February 2001. It was very bright and sunny day. After counting the many waders in the shallow waters of the inter-tidal zone, we waded through and entered a small island, more accessible due to low tide, and disturbed this pair of owls sunning on the sand. The sequence that followed was true to the description of Ali & Ripley (1987), "frequently seen sunning itself, sprawling on the ground on its underside with wings outstretched. When flushed it often makes prolonged flights in bright sunlight without apparent discomfort. Single bird is the rule, but loose scattered flocks are not unusual. The flight is attained by steady deliberate wing-beats".

The flight was slow, steady with deliberate wing beats and they did not seem to be wary of us. For a full five minutes they flew around in circles and then settled a few meters away and the camouflage was wonderful due to which we failed to notice them on the first instance.

The first author had seen Short-eared Owls in a similar terrain, an estuarine belt near Dativare near Mumbai coast, Maharashtra during 1991-1994. The present sighting of the Short-eared Owl from the coast of Kerala is significant, as this is a sighting of the species from the state after a gap of about 68 years.

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