

OWLS OF INDIA

Imperilled by
Illegal Wildlife Trade

Identification cards

TRAFFIC



USING THE IDENTIFICATION (ID) CARDS

Identification (ID) Cards: Imperilled by the illegal wildlife trade-Owls of India, 2021, have been developed to help wildlife law enforcement agencies identify 16 owl species commonly found in the illicit wildlife trade in India. The ID cards will help in quick reference of important information about commonly traded species, including their main identification features, legal and conservation status, and geographical distribution.

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INTRODUCTION

Owls belong to the Order Strigiformes and families Strigidae (true owls) and Tytonidae (barn, grass, and bay owls). There are about 250 species of owls worldwide, and of these, about 36 species are found in India.

Owls are primarily nocturnal. They are birds of prey and their diet includes small mammals, birds, frogs, lizards, and insects. They are also prime consumers of common agricultural pests such as mice and rats and help keep the disease vectors at bay.

LEGAL STATUS OF OWLS

All owl species in India are protected under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, making poaching, trade, or any other form of exploitation a punishable offence. The Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewitti* is listed in Schedule I of the Act, whereas all other species are in Schedule IV.

International trade in owl species found in India is prohibited under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewitti* is listed in Appendix I of CITES, while all other Indian species are listed in Appendix II.

OWLS IN ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE

Owls in India are victims of superstitious beliefs and rituals often promoted amongst the unsuspecting public by local mystic practitioners.

Despite the legal restrictions, every year, hundreds of birds are sacrificed for mystic rituals and practices linked with superstition, totems, and taboos across the country, and this practice usually peaks around the festival of Diwali. The use of owl parts such as the skull, feathers, ear tufts, claws, heart, liver, kidney, blood, eyes, fat, beak, tears, eggshells, meat, and bones are commonly prescribed for ceremonial *pujas* and rituals, especially in smaller towns and villages.

TRAFFIC has identified 16 owl species (as mentioned on the following pages) that are most commonly reported in illegal wildlife trade.

References:

- i. <https://www.owlpages.com/owls/>
- ii. <https://indianbirds.thedynamicnature.com/>
- iii. Ahmed, A. (2010). *Imperilled Custodians of the Night: A study on illegal trade, trapping and utilization of owls in India*. TRAFFIC India/WWF-India. New Delhi, India.
- iv. Grewal, B., & Bhatia, G. (2014). *A Naturalist's Guide to the Birds of India: Including Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka*. John Beaufoy Publishing.
- v. Grimmett, R., Inskipp, C., & Inskipp, T. (2016). *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent: India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and the Maldives*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- vi. Krys Kazmierczak (2017). *Field Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. Om Books International Publishing, 352 pages.

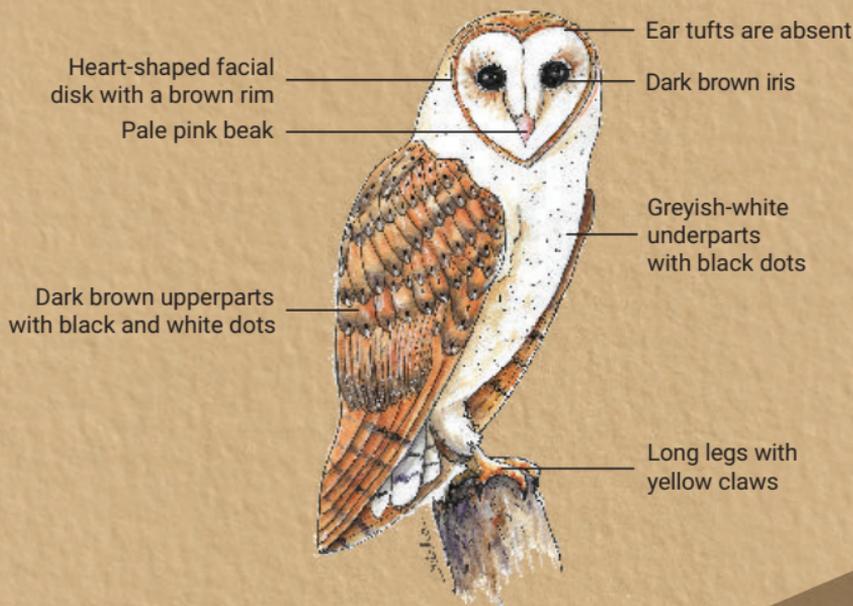
BARN OWL *Tyto alba*



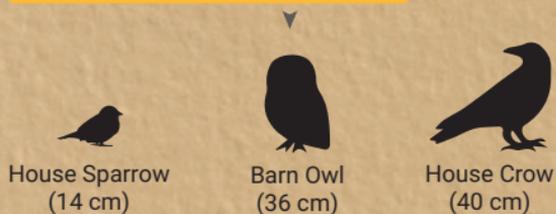
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KEY ID FEATURES



SIZE



DISTRIBUTION

Widespread resident in India (Grimmett *et al.*, 2016).

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WPA, 1972

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EASTERN GRASS OWL *Tyto longimembris*



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KEY ID FEATURES

Heart-shaped facial disk bordered by a brown ruff. It is white in males and pale orange buff* in females

Whitish-cream beak

Brown and buff* upperparts, spotted with white

Relatively short white tail with narrow grey barring

Ear tufts are absent

Relatively small blackish-brown iris with black tear marks

White underparts with scattered brown spots

Heavily feathered, long legs & yellowish-grey in colour. The claws are blackish-brown.



*buff - yellowish beige

SIZE



House Sparrow
(14 cm)



Eastern Grass Owl
(36 cm)



House Crow
(40 cm)

DISTRIBUTION

Northeast and southwest India (Grimmett *et al.*, 2016).

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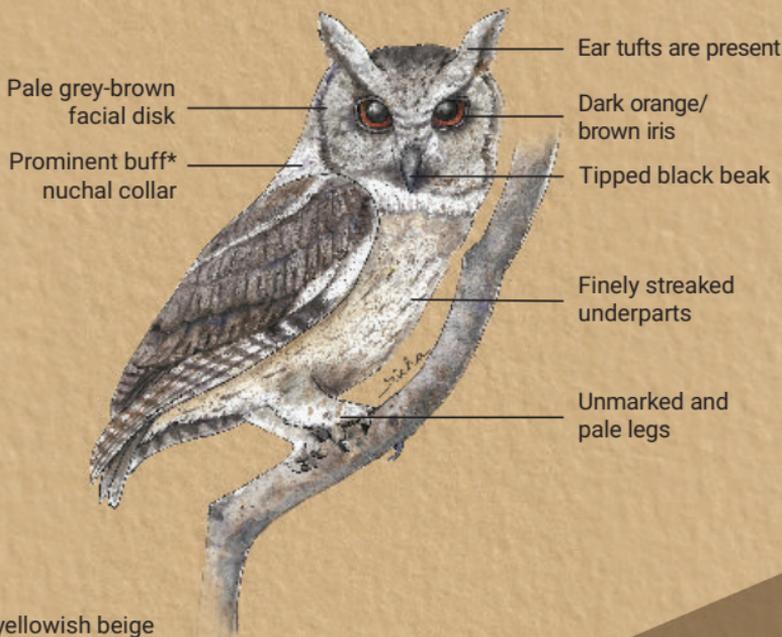
COLLARED SCOPS OWL *Otus bakkamoena*



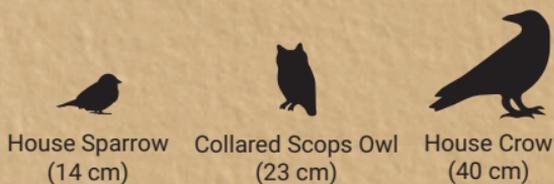
TRAFFIC



KEY ID FEATURES



SIZE



DISTRIBUTION

Widespread distributed, not recorded in parts of northwest and northeast India (Grimmett *et al.*, 2016).

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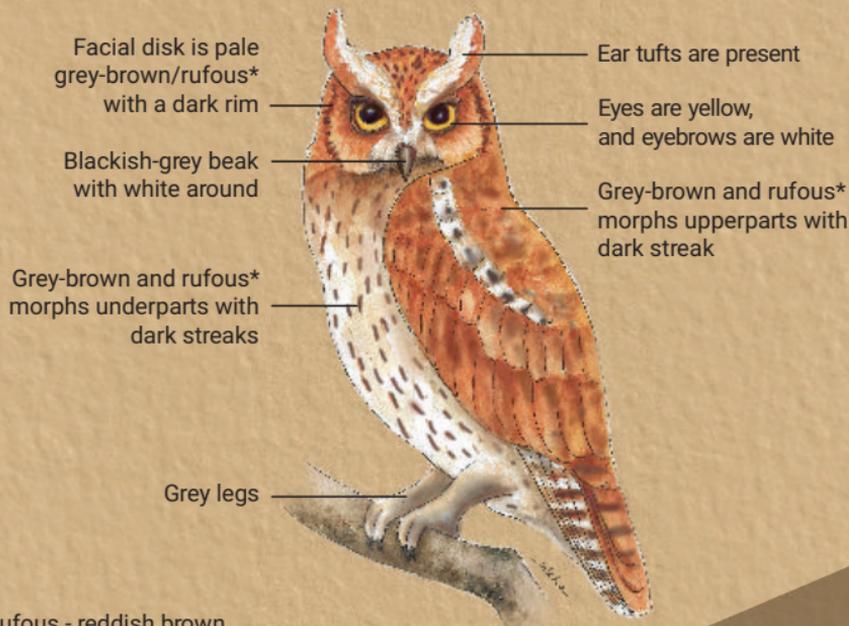
ORIENTAL SCOPS OWL *Otus sunia*



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KEY ID FEATURES



SIZE



DISTRIBUTION

Himalayas, northeast, western and southern India (Grimmett et al., 2016).

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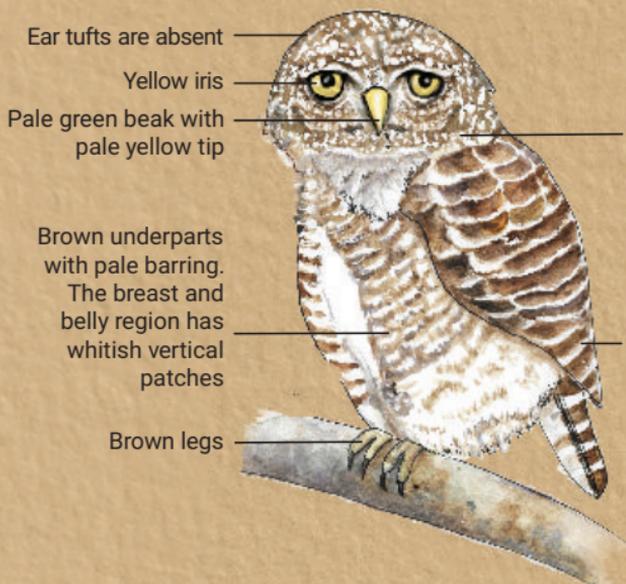
COLLARED OWLET *Glaucidium brodiei*



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KEY ID FEATURES



A pale, whitish collar that is visible only when the neck is stretched. From behind, the neck collar with black spots on each side looks deceptively like an owl's face and the species is often referred to as the four-eyed owl.

Dark brown upperparts with white bars

SIZE



House Sparrow
(14 cm)



Collared Owlet
(17 cm)



House Crow
(40 cm)

DISTRIBUTION

Himalayas, northeast India (Grimmett *et al.*, 2016).

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KEY ID FEATURES



SIZE



DISTRIBUTION

Himalayas, northeast India (Grimmett *et al.*, 2016).

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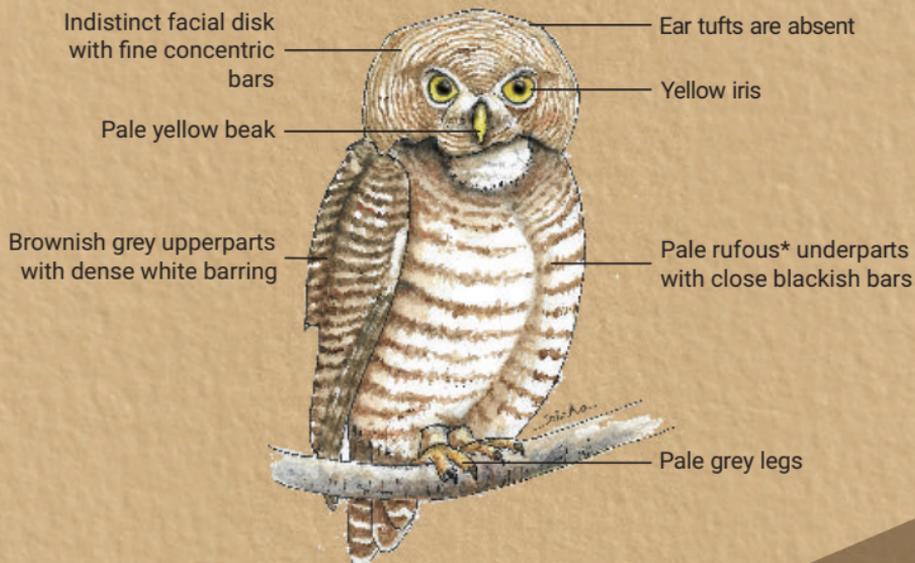
JUNGLE OWLET *Glaucidium radiatum*



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KEY ID FEATURES



SIZE



DISTRIBUTION

Widespread resident up to 2,000m in the Himalayas except in extreme northeast and northwestern parts of India (Grewal & Bhatia, 2014).

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SPOTTED OWLET *Athene brama*



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KEY ID FEATURES

White facial disk
with spotted crown

Pale yellow beak

Brown upperparts
with white spots

Ear tufts are absent

Yellow iris

White underparts, with
short brown streaks

Feathered legs with
yellow claws



SIZE



House Sparrow
(14 cm)



Spotted Owlet
(21 cm)



House Crow
(40 cm)

DISTRIBUTION

Throughout India, up to about 1,800m in the outer Himalayas in open forests, orchards, cultivation, vicinity of habitation (Grewal & Bhatia, 2014).

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ROCK EAGLE OWL *Bubo bengalensis*



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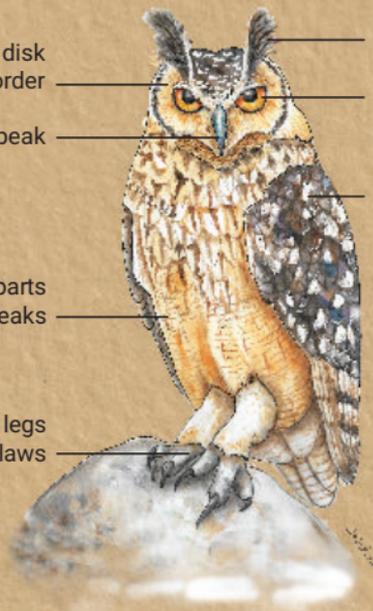
KEY ID FEATURES

Buff* coloured facial disk
with a blackish border

Dark grey beak

Whitish underparts
with dark streaks

Fully feathered legs
with dark grey claws



Ear tufts are present

Fiery orange to a dark
yellow iris

Tawny brown upperparts,
with dark grey markings

*buff - yellowish beige

SIZE



House Sparrow
(14 cm)



House Crow
(40 cm)



Rock Eagle Owl
(56 cm)

DISTRIBUTION

Widespread resident up to about 1,500m in the Himalayas. Unrecorded in parts of northeast and northwest India (Grewal & Bhatia, 2014).

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SPOT-BELLIED EAGLE OWL *Bubo nipalensis*



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KEY ID FEATURES

Facial disk is pale grey-brown/rufous* with a dark rim

Yellow beak

Pale brown underparts with broad dark brown spots. The flanks have black and white horizontal stripes

Feathered legs with grey claws

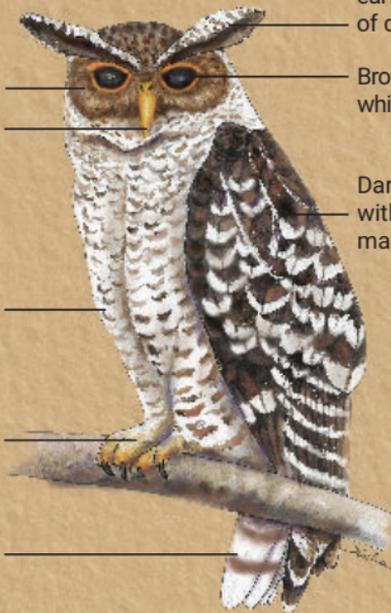
Brown tail with white tip

*rufous - reddish brown

Two outwardly slanting erect black and white ear tufts, with feathers of different sizes.

Brown-black eyes & white eyebrows

Dark brown upperparts, with black bar-like markings



SIZE



House Sparrow
(14 cm)



House Crow
(40 cm)



Spot-Bellied Eagle Owl
(63 cm)

DISTRIBUTION

Himalayas, northeast India, western Ghats
(Grimmett et al., 2016).

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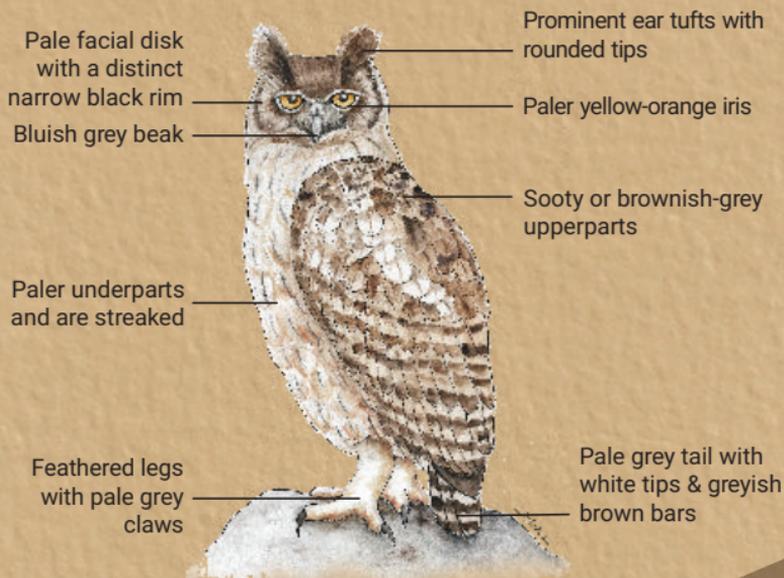
DUSKY EAGLE OWL *Bubo coromandus*



TRAFFIC



KEY ID FEATURES



SIZE



House Sparrow
(14 cm)



House Crow
(40 cm)



Dusky Eagle Owl
(58 cm)

DISTRIBUTION

Widespread residents in north and central part of India (Grimmett *et al.*, 2016).

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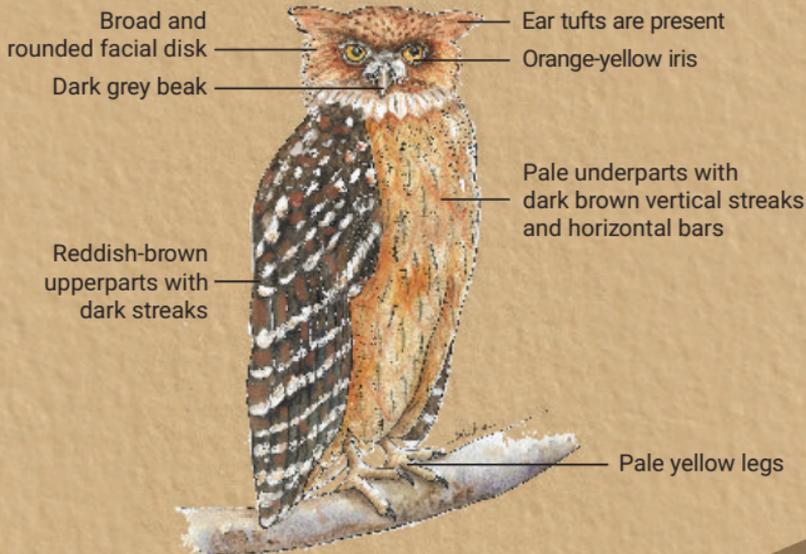
BROWN FISH OWL *Ketupa zeylonensis*



TRAFFIC



KEY ID FEATURES



SIZE



House Sparrow
(14 cm)



House Crow
(40 cm)



Brown Fish Owl
(56 cm)

DISTRIBUTION

Widespread resident (Grimmett *et al.*, 2016).

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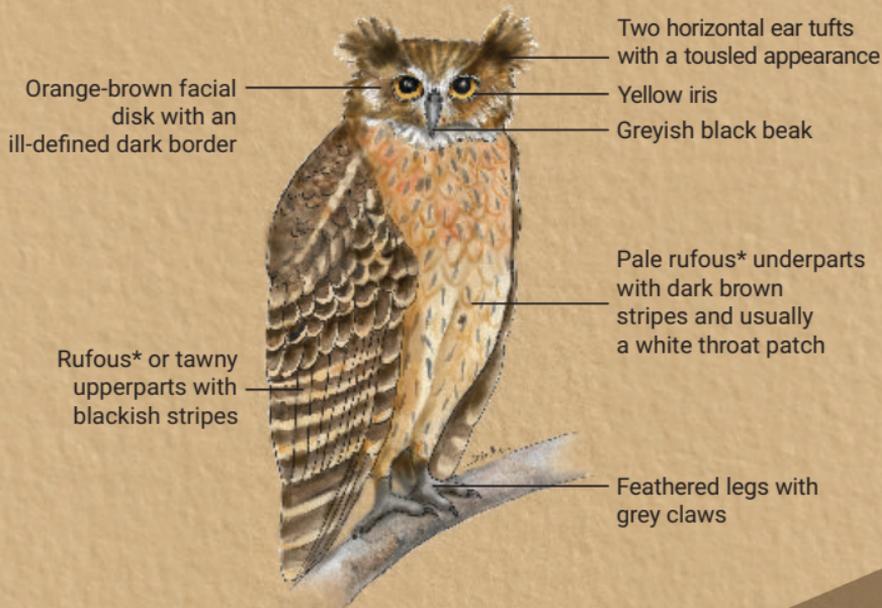
TAWNY FISH OWL *Ketupa flavipes*



TRAFFIC



KEY ID FEATURES



*rufous - reddish brown

SIZE



House Sparrow
(14 cm)



House Crow
(40 cm)



Tawny Fish Owl
(61 cm)

DISTRIBUTION

Himalayas, northeast India (Grimmett *et al.*, 2016).

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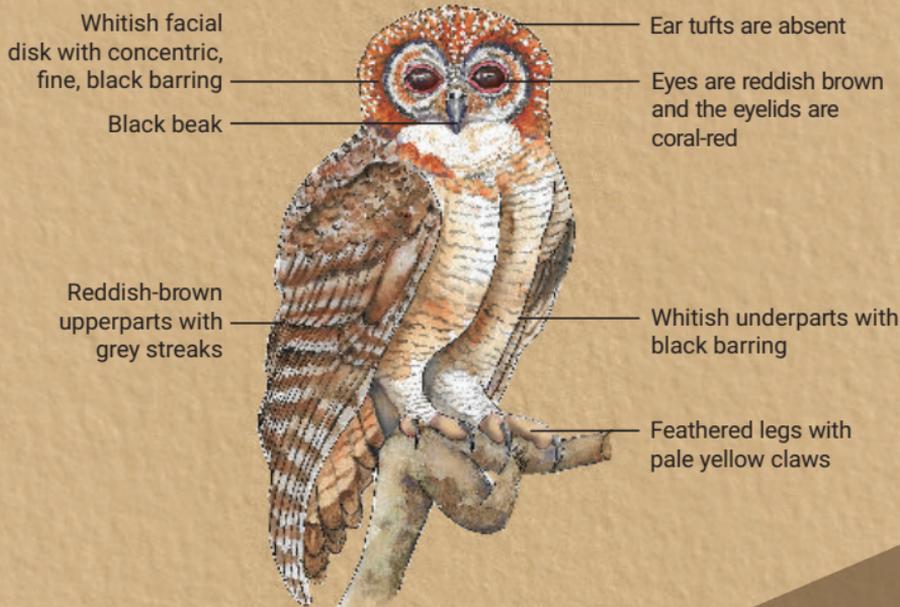
MOTTLED WOOD OWL *Strix ocellata*



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KEY ID FEATURES



SIZE



House Sparrow
(14 cm)



House Crow
(40 cm)



Mottled Wood Owl
(48 cm)

DISTRIBUTION

Peninsular western and eastern ghats, and in Central India (Grimmett *et al.*, 2016).

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BROWN WOOD OWL *Strix leptogrammica*



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KEY ID FEATURES

Ear tufts are absent
Dark iris
Greenish-horn beak
with bluish base and
pale yellowish-green tip

Brown upperparts.
Throat has a narrow,
white horizontal patch



White facial disk in the
Himalayan race and rufous*
in the peninsular race, with
a distinct black rim, and
a blackish zone around
the eyes. Eyebrows are
whitish-buffish* or
pale orange-buff*

Brown underparts

Dusky lead grey legs

*buff - yellowish beige
*rufous - reddish brown

SIZE



House Sparrow
(14 cm)



House Crow
(40 cm)



Brown Wood Owl
(50 cm)

DISTRIBUTION

Parts of the Himalayas, northeast India, eastern and western Ghats (Grimmett *et al.*, 2016).

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BROWN HAWK OWL *Ninox scutulata*



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KEY ID FEATURES



SIZE



DISTRIBUTION

North, northeast, eastern ghats, western ghats, Andaman and Nicobar Island (Grimmett et al., 2016).

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TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, is a leading non-governmental organisation working globally on trade in wild animals and plants in the context of both biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. In India, TRAFFIC operates as a programme division of WWF-India.

WWF-India

WWF-India is committed to creating and demonstrating practical solutions that help conserve India's ecosystems and rich biodiversity. Marking 50 years of conservation journey in the country, WWF-India works towards finding science-based and sustainable solutions to address challenges at the interface of development and conservation. Today, with over 70 offices across 20 states, WWF-India's work spans across thematic areas including the conservation of key wildlife species and their habitats, management of rivers, wetlands and their ecosystems, climate change adaptation, driving sustainable solutions for business and agriculture, empowering local communities as stewards of conservation, combatting illegal wildlife trade and inspiring students and citizens to take positive action for the environment through outreach and awareness campaigns. WWF-India is part of the WWF International Network, with presence in over 100 countries across the globe.

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