

SPECIAL REPORT

An emerging Asian taste for owls? Enforcement agency seizes 1,236 owls and other wildlife in Malaysia

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On 4 November 2008, enforcement staff from the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (Perhilitan) in Peninsular Malaysia raided a storage facility and freezer unit in Muar, a town in the southern state of Johor, after receiving a tip-off that a shipment of wildlife was being prepared for illegal export to China. Among the many animals seized were 917 owls and two eagles, comprising six species:

- Barn Owl *Tyto alba* – 796
- Barred Eagle Owl *Bubo sumatranus* – 8
- Buffy Fish Owl *Ketupa ketupu* – 14
- Spotted Wood Owl *Strix seloputo* – 95
- Brown Wood Owl *Strix leptogrammica* – 4
- Crested Serpent Eagle *Spilornis cheela* – 2

All the birds were plucked of their feathers, except for the heads and feet, presumably so that buyers

would clearly see what they were purchasing (Plates 1 & 2).

One man was arrested and charged with various offences under Malaysia's primary wildlife legislation, the Protection of Wild Life Act 1972 (Act No 76), but pleaded not guilty. He was released on a bail of M\$19,000 (US\$5,260), and the case is still to come to trial at the time of writing. Also seized were parts of other species legally protected at various levels, including one Malayan Pangolin *Manis javanica*, one Malayan Porcupine *Hystrix brachyura*, one Greater Mouse Deer *Tragulus napu*, approximately six Reticulated Pythons *Python reticulatus*, 51 Clouded Monitor Lizards *Varanus bengalensis*, five Wild Pigs *Sus scrofa* (four of them live juveniles) and the hind legs of a Malayan Sun Bear *Helarctos malayanus*.

Plate 1. Evidence of the size of the seizure made on 4 November 2008.





Plate 2. The feathered heads of slaughtered owls can be clearly seen.

Information gleaned from the first raid led to a second seizure in the town of Segamat, also in the state of Johor, where 7,093 Clouded Monitor Lizards were seized. No arrests were made. The surviving lizards were released by the authorities.

Two months later, another similar seizure was made, this time in the state of Kuantan. Perhilitan seized 319 plucked owls of undisclosed species along with 25 hind legs and 22 paws of Malayan Sun Bear and 2,330 live Clouded Monitor Lizards from the car repair shop where they were hidden.

This is the first evidence of owls being hunted for meat in Peninsular Malaysia, and the first seizures involving large numbers of owls. The owls are believed to have been trapped in Malaysia, and the authorities plan to conduct DNA testing to confirm this.

All of these consignments were to be smuggled out of Malaysia, probably to China, and these seizures could be indicative of a new trend in wild meat consumption in China. In November 2007, two suspects were arrested in China with 62 protected owls. The suspects claimed the birds were being transported to restaurants in Guangzhou,

Guangdong province (http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-12/01/content_7180115.htm). More monitoring and research into this newly emerging trade is urgently required.

Peninsular Malaysia is home to 16 species of owls, all of them totally protected by the Protection of Wild Life Act 1972 (Act No 76) and all listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Violation of the Wild Life Act carries a penalty of a fine of not more than M\$ 3,000 (approximately US\$ 830) or not more than two years in jail or both.

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