

**5. OCCURRENCE AND BREEDING RECORD OF THE FOREST OWLET
HETEROGLAUX BLEWITTI FROM YAWAL WILDLIFE SANCTUARY,
MAHARASHTRA, INDIA**

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The Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewitti* is one of the least known birds of India. It was considered extinct for 113 years, until its rediscovery on November 25, 1997, by Ben King, Pamela Rasmussen, and David Abbott in Toranmal Reserve Forest of Shahada in Nandurbar district, Maharashtra (King and Rasmussen 1998; Rasmussen and Collar 1998).

The Forest Owlet is protected under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972, and is listed as critically endangered.

We were working to prepare a management plan for the buffer zone of Yawal Wildlife Sanctuary in Jalgaon district of Maharashtra situated in the Satpuda Mountain range. The 177.52 sq. km Sanctuary was established in 1969, and is located between Melghat Tiger Reserve and Toranmal Reserve Forest. Since the habitat of Yawal WS is similar to both these reserves, which hold a population of the Forest Owlet (Ishtiaq and Rahmani 2000; Jathar and Rahmani 2004), we speculated the presence of this critically endangered bird in the area.

On May 21, 2004, we were travelling in our vehicle towards the western side of the buffer zone through compartment number 166 (21° 36' 94" N; 75° 53' 147" E). The area is under the jurisdiction of the Forest Development Corporation of Maharashtra (FDCM). The FDCM has carried out Teak *Tectona grandis* plantations in these compartments about eight years ago. The average height of the trees is about 8-10 m. There was very little undergrowth, probably due to the continuous contour trenching (soil and water conservation work) carried out by the FDCM through out the area.

At about 1715 hrs an owlet flew past in front of our vehicle. The plumage pattern and colour of the owlet seemed to be different. We could not locate the bird as it disappeared in the nearby forest. We went in the direction the Owlet flew, but could not locate it. So we decided to play the call of the Forest Owlet, recorded from Melghat Tiger Reserve by the second author; the call was verified with records at the Bombay Natural History Society. As soon as we played the call, the Owlet immediately responded and came closer to investigate. It sat on a leafless teak *Tectona grandis* tree for about 10 minutes. We continued playing the call and to our surprise at around 1725 hrs one more bird responded to the call.

Therefore, in all two birds were present in the vicinity. One of them approached us, up to a distance of c. 150 m. We got an opportunity to take some photographs of this individual and carefully observe its plumage. The crown, nape and back were unspotted brown, sharply contrasting with the broadly blackish and white banded wings. The breast looked entirely dull brown, contrasting sharply with the white belly. We observed another Forest Owlet later in the day close to the site where we first observed it. The belly of the owlet was distinctly blotched. The body colour appeared darker with a stumpy tail. This suggested that the owlet was an immature and that the earlier birds could have been one of the parent birds.

Therefore, we conclude successful breeding of the Forest Owlet in Yawal Wildlife Sanctuary. We have been able to identify the major stress factors in Yawal WS, which would possibly affect the Forest Owlet population in the Sanctuary.

The stressors are listed below:

Clearing of land for agriculture within the Sanctuary, some nesting trees may have been affected.

Infiltration of villagers from Madhya Pradesh for collection of fire wood and timber.

Encroachment for agriculture and new settlements within the Sanctuary.

Forest fires in the Sanctuary.

Many proposed and existing minor irrigation dams in the last remaining open scrub forest.

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