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Cover: Golden-headed Lion Tamarin *Leontopithecus chrysomelas*. Watercolor and acrylics by P. Kritika.



## First photographic evidence of Spot-bellied Eagle Owl *Ketupa nipalensis* (Strigiformes: Strigidae) in Palamau Tiger Reserve, Jharkhand, India

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The Spot-bellied Eagle Owl *Ketupa nipalensis*, also known as the Forest Eagle Owl, is a large species of owl found in parts of southern and southeastern Asia (König & Weick 2008). The Spot-bellied Eagle Owl has a disjunct distribution in India, primarily inhabiting well-forested areas in hilly or mountainous regions. Its range includes the sub-Himalayan belt from Uttarakhand eastward through northeastern India, the Western Ghats from southwestern Maharashtra to its southern tip, and locally in the Eastern Ghats, central Indian highlands, and parts of Gujarat (Jayapal et al. 2005; Grimmett et al. 2011; Majumder et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The species is categorized as 'Least Concern' under the IUCN Red List due to its large range, although its population trend is decreasing (Birdlife International 2018).

On 27 September 2024, at approximately 2130 h, an individual of Spot-bellied Eagle Owl was observed and photographed perching on a *Ficus religiosa* tree (Image 1) in the mixed deciduous forests of the South Division, within the Palamau Tiger Reserve, Jharkhand (23.599° N, 84.153° E). It was sighted on a clear night with a temperature of approximately 24 °C. The individual was identified as a Spot-bellied Eagle Owl by its large

size (60–70 cm), prominent ear tufts, and characteristic spotting on the underparts, which were clearly visible even in the low light conditions (Grimmett et al. 2011). The deep, booming call often heard at dusk and dawn further confirmed our suspicions (Ali & Ripley 1981). These features distinguish it from other owl species found in the region, such as the Brown Fish Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis* or the Indian Eagle Owl *Bubo bengalensis*.

The nearest known populations are in the Central Indian highlands, though specific recent records from this region are scarce. The closest documented recent sighting is from Similipal Tiger Reserve, Odisha, approximately 400 km south-east, where the first photographic record for the state was obtained in 2018 (Nayak et al. 2019). Additionally, individuals of this species were observed at Satkosia Tiger Reserve, perched on a *Shorea robusta* tree, and at Tamana Reserve Forest roosting on a *Terminalia bellirica* tree (Jena et al. 2025). Recent eBird records have documented the species from several locations in Odisha: Labangi Forest Road, Angul (Nair 2023), Bhajam-Champagarh Forest Road, Mayurbhanj (Rathore 2020), Rissia, Kuldiha, and Baleswar (Chand 2024), all within 250–350 km south-east of our observation. Further north-east, the species has

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been consistently recorded from northern West Bengal, including Buxa Tiger Reserve (Shome 2018), Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary, and Rongtong, Darjeeling (Mehta 2024; Roy 2024), approximately 450–550 km from the present location. Several records indicate the presence of the Spot-bellied Eagle Owl in central India. Notably, photographic evidence exists from Kanha National Park,

Madhya Pradesh, with sightings reported in February 1994 (D'Cunha & Ali 2001) and May 2007 (Deshmukh 2008). Additional records include observations from Bori Wildlife Sanctuary (Mehta 1998; Jayapal et al. 2005) and Pench Tiger Reserve, where an individual was documented in April 2004 (Jayapal et al. 2005) and again in March 2011 (Majumder et al. 2011). Another notable



Image 1. Spot-bellied Eagle Owl perched on a peepal tree. © Shera Gupta

record comes from Papikonda National Park, Andhra Pradesh, roughly 700 km south, which represented a range extension in the Eastern Ghats (Srinivasan 2013). The observation in Palamau Tiger Reserve extends the known distribution of the Spot-bellied Eagle Owl significantly westward within central India, suggesting a broader but underreported presence in this region. This sighting is particularly noteworthy given the species' association with specific habitat types and its generally patchy distribution.

Several hypotheses could explain this unusual sighting, as intercontinental vagrants are even seen due to climatic changes (Byju & Raveendran 2022): (1) Range Expansion: Climate change and habitat alterations might be driving the species to expand its range. (2) Undocumented Population: A small, previously unrecorded population might exist in or around Palamau Tiger Reserve. (3) Vagrant Individual: The observed owl could be a vagrant that has strayed far from its typical range. (4) Seasonal Movement: Although not known for long-distance migrations, this sighting could indicate previously unknown seasonal movements.

This observation underscores the need for comprehensive avifaunal surveys within Palamau Tiger Reserve and surrounding areas. Such surveys could reveal whether this sighting represents an isolated incident or indicates a broader shift in the species' distribution. The documentation of the Spot-bellied Eagle Owl in Palamau Tiger Reserve highlights the potential for discoveries even in relatively well-studied areas and emphasizes the importance of continued biodiversity monitoring in protected areas.

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