

## TAXONOMIC UNCERTAINTY OF THE NEW SCOPS OWL FROM SRI LANKA - Part 2

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Any discussion on the newly discovered Serendib Scops-owl *Otus thilohoffmanni* must first address the question of the enigmatic Rufous Scops Owl (Legge 1880, 1983). Legge clearly recognized three species of eared Scops-owls in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). They are (i) Forster's Scops-owl *Scops bakkamuna* (=Collared Scops-owl *Otus bakkamoena*) (ii) Rufous Scops-owl *Scops sunia* (= *Otus sunia*?) and (iii) Little Scops-owl *Scops minutus* (=Oriental Scops-owl *Otus sunia leggei*). However Ticehurst (1923), without any discussion or explanation, apparently dismissed the Rufous Scops-owl and only recognized the Collared and Oriental Scops-owls as occurring in Sri Lanka. (All subsequent writers on Sri Lankan birds have unquestioningly followed Ticehurst, even though he did not justify his action). However Legge, who was an astute observer and a competent ornithologist, had clearly differentiated between the Rufous, and Oriental Scops-Owls. Nevertheless, the Rufous Scops-owl was not acknowledged or discussed in the deliberations on the "new Scops-owl" from Sri Lanka, (Warakagoda and Rasmussen, 2004), nor was any reference made to Legge's publication (*op. cit.*) which contains a detailed description of the Rufous Scops-owl. Whether the Rufous Scops-owl is a valid species as believed by Legge, is something which needs to be addressed and resolved as it could have a direct bearing on the Serendib Scops-owl as a new species.

After more than three years dedicated study of the Serendib Scops-owl, it was reported that "c. 45 individuals ..... are known" from "five sites" and the **absence of eartufts** was treated as a diagnostic characteristic of the species (Warakagoda and Rasmussen *op. cit.*, Rasmussen and Anderton 2005). Therefore, when it was reported in the press (Anon. 2006) that the Serendib Scops-owl **has eartufts**, an obvious question was whether it would be possible to distinguish this "new" species from the Rufous Scops-owl as well as from the rufous morphs of some subspecies of *O. sunia*. Based on information provided by Legge (*op. cit.*), it is clear that the Rufous Scops-owl (and also the rufous morphs of some races of *O. sunia*) has eartufts, rufous colouration and skin measurements broadly comparable with those of the Serendib Scops-owl (refer to part 1 of this paper). In a puzzling adjunct it was stated variously that the Serendib Scops-owl has "eartuft like protrusions", "pseudo eartufts", "apparent eartufts" and "slight eartufts". (It is a fact that many "eared" owls, including

most Scops-owls, normally retract their eartufts but erect them when excited, alert, surprised etc.). The other source of confusion (mentioned in Part 1) is that in table 1 of their paper Warakagoda and Rasmussen (*op. cit.*) give "Length of eartufts" of the Serendib Scops-owl as 23.2mm although, as already pointed out, the **same** paper states clearly that the Serendib Scops-owl does not possess eartufts.

The call of the Serendib Scops-owl is treated as a diagnostic characteristic (Warakagoda and Rasmussen *op. cit.*). However since calls of the different subspecies of *Otus sunia* are known to vary considerably, and the fact that sonograms of the Rufous Scops-owl were never made (the necessary technology did not exist in Legge's time), it is not possible to compare calls of the Rufous and Serendib Scops-owls; this leaves open the possibility, that their calls could be similar or even identical. In view of this, the question arises as to whether the call of *O. thilohoffmanni* can be treated as a diagnostic characteristic.

The apparent ambiguities, incongruities and the fact that validity of two diagnostic characteristics (lack of eartufts and call) is open to question, makes it relevant to ask: Is *O. thilohoffmanni* a valid species; **or** is it a (possibly new) subspecies of the polymorphic *O. sunia*; **or** is it a rediscovery of the Rufous Scops-owl? Or is there another explanation?

Sri Lankan ornithologists and taxonomists look forward to clarification of these issues.

### REFERENCES

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