

Distribution Update

First breeding record of brown fish owl in Jajarkot district, western Nepal

GOVINDA BAHADUR SINGH

District Livestock Service Office, Jajarkot district, Nepal

My profession as an animal health technician involves visiting far-off villages often on foot to provide basic veterinary services. Long walks can be tiresome, so I have developed an interest in birding to make these long treks exciting and meaningful.

On 16 March 2018, I was on my usual trek to Sakla village of Barkote Rural Municipality, Jajarkot district. It was 11 am in the morning when I reached Lokane river which is situated at an elevation of 1,402 m. I noticed two Egyptian vultures *Neophron percnopterus* flying overhead. During my last visit I had seen a vulture nest in a nearby cliff.

Feeling excited that these vultures might be using it, I ran to a vantage point to observe the nest. The nesting materials (small branches and twigs) which were previously there were gone, and it looked abandoned. I was about to conclude that it was indeed the case when suddenly something inside the nest moved. I peered closer and noticed that there were some birds, but they were definitely not vultures! Without wasting any time, I focused my binoculars at the nest to find an owl with two chicks. I was unable to identify the species. I took some photographs. They were later identified as brown fish owl *Ketupa zeylonensis* by Raju Acharya, a veteran owl conservationist.



PHOTO 1: Brown fish owl *Ketupa zeylonensis* with chicks.

Brown fish owls are known to prefer wetland and riverine habitats (Inskipp et al 2016). Literature records show that they have been documented in Nepal at elevations up to 1,750 m (GC et al. 2017) however the species was recently sighted at Mallas village of Parbat district at 1,900 m which is the highest elevational record

for the species in Nepal (Som GC per. comm). This observation is the first record of the species in Jajarkot district and the first confirmed breeding record of brown fish owls at such high elevation in Nepal.

The nearest human settlement is at a 30 minutes walking distance from this location. There are bushes and small agricultural fields alongside the Lokane khola at the base of the cliff. The area is ideal for brown fish owls, with plenty of food which includes fish, frogs, crabs, snakes, and rodents. Discussion with some local people in Sakla village revealed that the cliff used to be occupied by Egyptian vultures. But they were not sure as to when the owls started using the area.

Hunting and trade of owls is high in western Nepal, so I feel relieved that this area is far from human settlement and off the main travel route. However, it is important to initiate some form of conservation awareness activities in the area to protect and strengthen the future of this species.

References

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Biosketch

GOVINDA BAHADUR SINGH is working as an Animal Health Technician in Jajarkot district. He is interested in birds and wildlife issues and exploration.