



Reply to the Response to Pande et al. by Ishtiaq

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We welcome the immediate response to our paper (Pande et al. 2011) by Ishtiaq (2011). In today's 'Publish or Perish' ideology, many a scientific papers are published and simply fade away, therefore, even though hurriedly written and harshly worded, the response is heartening. We are sure that the response is prompted out of concern for conservation implications from possible hybridization.

We are well aware of the proposed revision of the genus *Athene* to *Heteroglaux* for the species *blewitti*. However, as is well known that this species was considered to be extinct for a long time, was recently rediscovered, is poorly studied and has been subject to taxonomic revisions earlier. We have decided to keep the previous generic name *Athene*, particularly because we have reported a possible hybrid between *Athene brama* and *Athene blewitti* in our paper. If our fear is true, then intra-generic hybridization is likely to be more common than inter-generic hybridization.

The paper also brings forth a vital issue of forming a national level scientific body well represented by qualified subject experts to authenticate and endorse the proposed changes in nomenclature (both for common names and zoological scientific names), particularly when such taxa

are endemic to our country and because several taxa are currently facing such proposed changes in their status. The arbitrariness of the designation of a taxon as a species purely on molecular studies or purely on taxonomic or behavioural aspects is well known. Two different species should stand the acid test of not interbreeding to produce fertile offspring. If our suspicion of hybridization between *Athene brama* and *Athene blewitti* is true, this test is falsified.

Few publications are reported on *Athene blewitti* and we have recently seen the photographs of the immature *Athene blewitti* owlets on the internet and we have come to the conclusion that, the plumage of proposed hybrids reported in our communication, differ from the juvenile *Athene blewitti* photographed by others. The differences are obvious and so also, there is no resemblance between the plumage of the proposed hybrids and either the adult or juvenile *Athene brama*. The voice differences are also described in our paper. Further studies on this aspect are also possible and need to be conducted.

We must mention here that any scientific progress is made by harbouring a high degree of suspicion and not by merely denying such propositions on orthodox and wishful thinking. No matter what amount of debate is done on this hypothesis, the truth shall prevail only after DNA testing.

Athene blewitti is an endemic, Endangered and Schedule I species and hence the limitations and shortcomings of the hypothesis in our study are already mentioned by us and the same are repeated in the anonymous response. We like to take this opportunity to encourage further field studies considering the far reaching consequences of such hybridization. We shall be most happy if our suspicion is ruled out, because the winners will be *Athene* (or *Heteroglaux*) *blewitti*, for obvious conservation implications.

REFERENCES

- Ishtiaq, F. (2011). Response to "Discovery of a possible hybrid of the Critically Endangered Forest Owlet *Athene blewitti* and Spotted Owlet *Athene brama* (Aves: Strigiformes) from northern Maharashtra, India" by Pande et al. *Journal of Threatened Taxa* 3(5): 1798.
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