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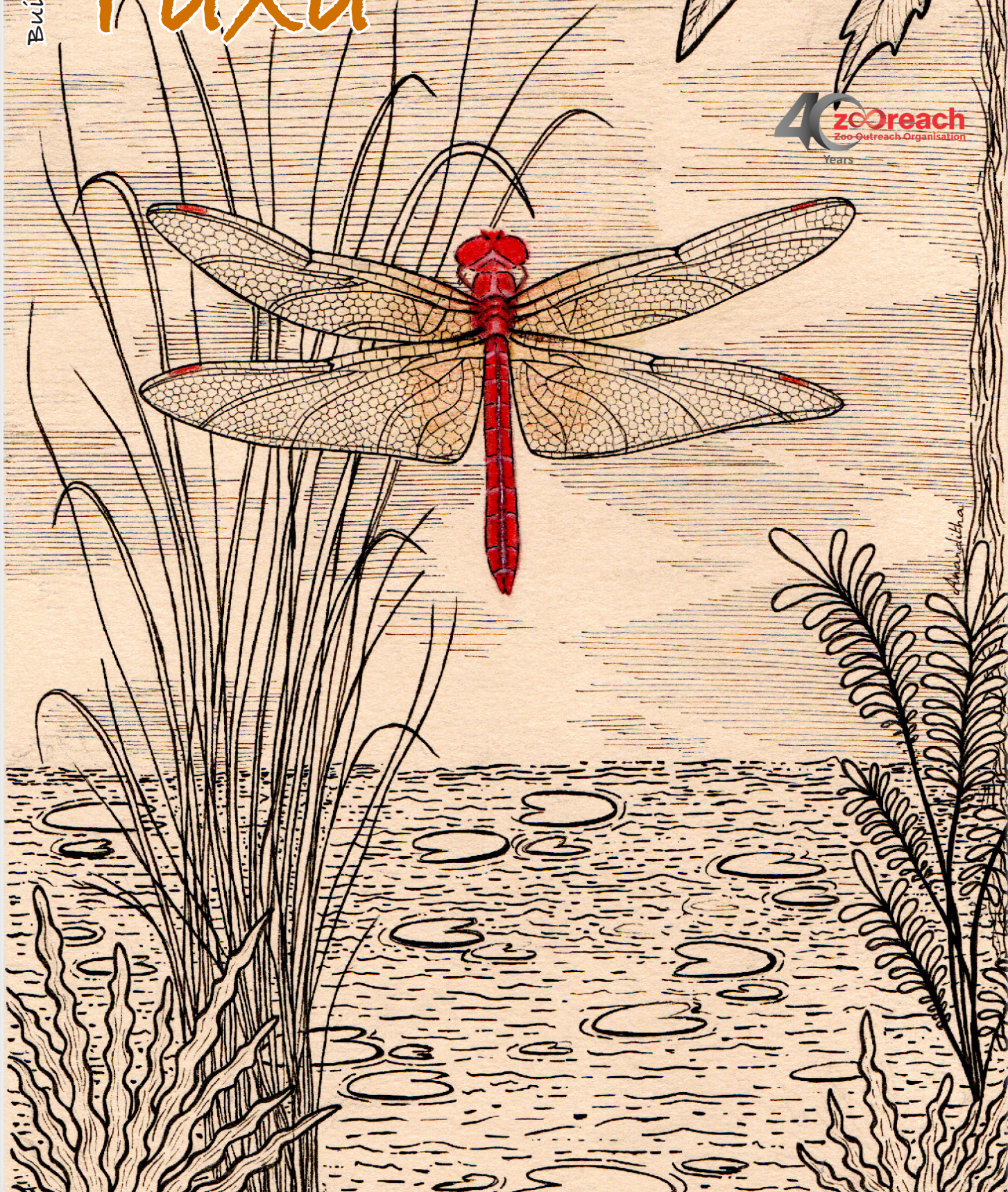
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Srivari Illam, No. 61, Karthik Nagar, 10th Street, Saravanampatti, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu 641035, India
Registered Office: 3A2 Varadarajulu Nagar, FCI Road, Ganapathy, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu 641006, India
Ph: +91 9385339863 | www.threatenedtaxa.org
Email: sanjay@threatenedtaxa.org

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Cover: A male Scarlet Skimmer perching on vegetation by the banks of a waterbody. Ink and watercolour illustration by Ananditha Pascal.



Filling the gap: first regional record of the Little Owl *Athene noctua ludlowi* (Strigiformes: Strigidae) from Uttarakhand, India

Anuj Joshi¹ , Dhanesh Ponnu² , Vineet K. Dubey³ & Sambandam Sathyakumar⁴

¹⁻⁴ Wildlife Institute of India, Chandrabani, Dehradun, Uttarakhand 248001, India
¹joshianuj671@gmail.com, ²radhadhaneshp@gmail.com, ³vineetkrdubey@gmail.com,
⁴sathyakumar1103@gmail.com (corresponding author)

High-altitude regions often support species that remain poorly documented due to harsh terrain and limited accessibility, resulting in substantial gaps in biodiversity knowledge (Shrestha et al. 2020). The Little Owl *Athene noctua* is widely distributed across the Palearctic region, with multiple subspecies distinguished primarily by plumage coloration and body size. Vaurie's (1960) comprehensive taxonomic revision recognized 13 subspecies of the Little Owl, including *A. n. ludlowi*, which occurs in the Himalayan region (Koelz 1939). Recent synthesis on the Little Owl confirms that the subspecies *Athene noctua ludlowi* occupies the Himalayan arc and adjoining Tibetan Plateau, with records supporting its occurrence across this region. These records, categorized into distinct geographical clusters, contributed to the delineation of 13 regions within the overall distribution range of the species (Nieuwenhuys et al. 2023). Although globally assessed as 'Least Concern' by the IUCN Red List with a stable population trend, *A. n. ludlowi* remains one of the least studied subspecies in the Himalaya (BirdLife International 2019). In India, the

species is not listed separately but, as a member of the family Strigidae, is included under Schedule II of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.

The distribution of the species in the Himalaya has been documented only sporadically over the past century, reflecting a consistent lack of focused research. The earliest records appear in The Fauna of British India (Baker 1922, 1927), with observations from the Mishmi Hills, Arunachal Pradesh, from the Lahaul-Spiti landscape of Himachal Pradesh (Marshall 1984), followed by trans-Himalayan records from Ladakh (Ludlow & Kinnear 1937). After several decades with little new information, modern confirmations emerged, including breeding records from Upper Mustang, Nepal (Acharya 2002). Pfister (2001) noted potential interbreeding between *A. n. ludlowi* and *A. n. bactriana* in the southern part of Tso Kar. Additional evidence has come from high-altitude locations such as Sela Pass, Arunachal Pradesh (Limparungpatthanakij et al. 2017), and northern Sikkim (Ganguli-Lachungpa et al. 2011). Taxonomic and distributional treatment in Rasmussen & Anderton

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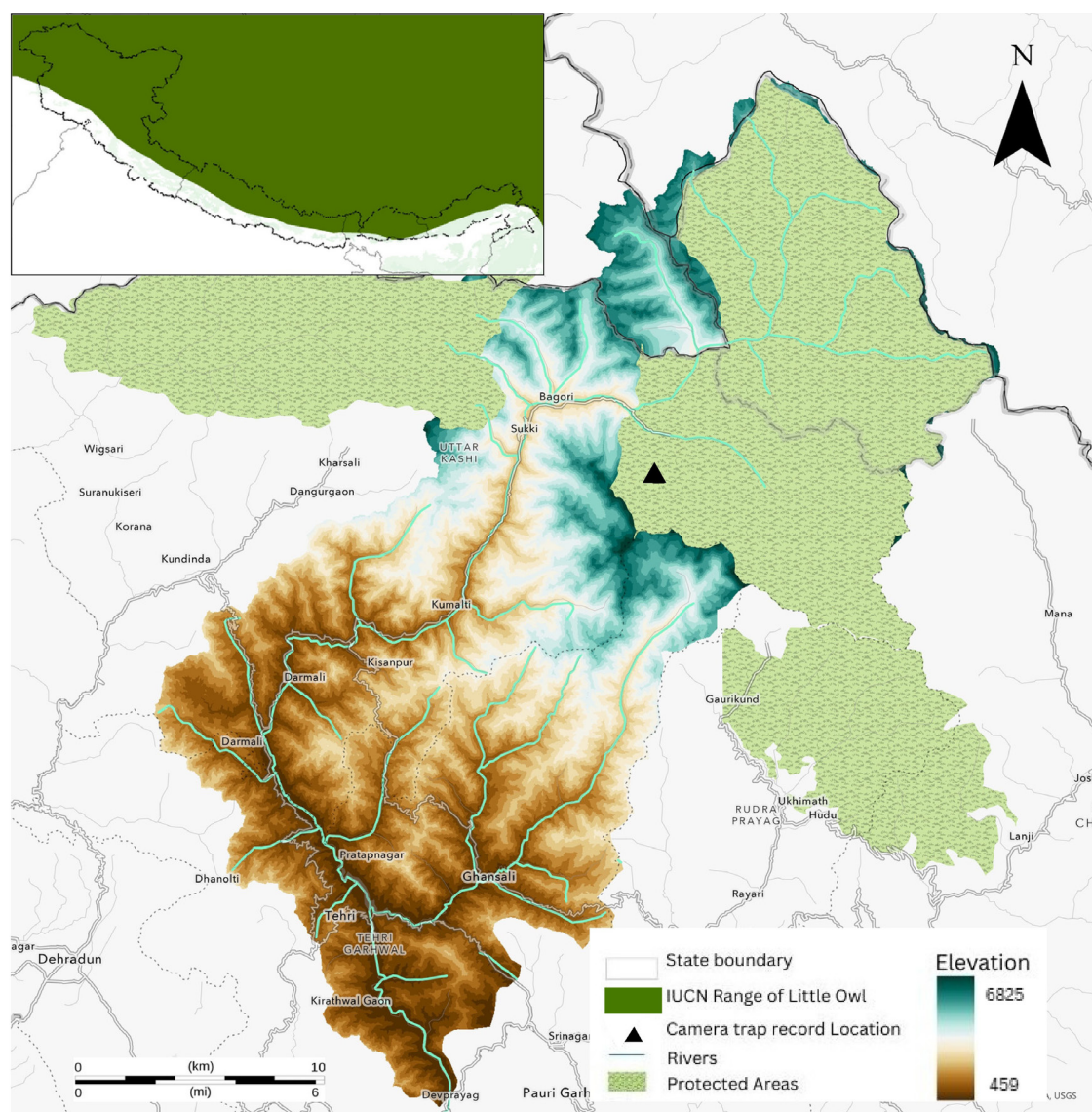


Image 1. An inset showing IUCN range of Little Owl *Athene noctua* (Scopoli, 1769) in the Indian Himalayan region with camera trap location (in black triangle) where the species has been captured in the Bhagirathi basin, Uttarakhand.

(2012) consolidated its status, while more recent work added the first national record in Bhutan (Wangdi 2015) and its inclusion in regional checklists (Bhutan Ecological Society 2018; NTNC 2018)

Here, we report a photographic record of the Little Owl from the high-altitude alpine habitat of the Upper Bhagirathi River Basin, Uttarakhand (30.943° N, 78.906° E) (Image 1). The identification was independently verified by multiple experienced birders, with key features including white spectacles, a white throat, and bold white spotting on the underparts (Image 2; Grimmett et al. 2011). The record is particularly noteworthy as it significantly exceeds the typical upper elevation range of the Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*,

which rarely occurs above 2,800 m, thereby supporting the validity of the identification. This study forms part of a long-term monitoring program titled 'Assessment and Monitoring of Climate Change Effects on Wildlife Species and Ecosystems for Developing Adaptation Strategies in the Indian Himalayan Region-DST NMSHE', aimed at understanding the responses of medium-sized mammals and ground-dwelling birds to changing climatic conditions in the region. The basin encompasses diverse habitats: subtropical broad-leaved and Chir Pine *Pinus roxburghii* forests at lower elevations (500–1,500 m); montane mixed broad-leaved forests and oak woodlands (*Quercus semecarpifolia*, *Q. floribunda*), and subalpine mixed coniferous forests (*Abies pindrow*,



Image 2. Camera-trap image of a Little Owl *Athene noctua* (Scopoli, 1769) from the Rudragaira Valley, Gangotri National Park. The inset highlights key identification features, including white spectacles, a white throat, and bold white spotting on the underparts.

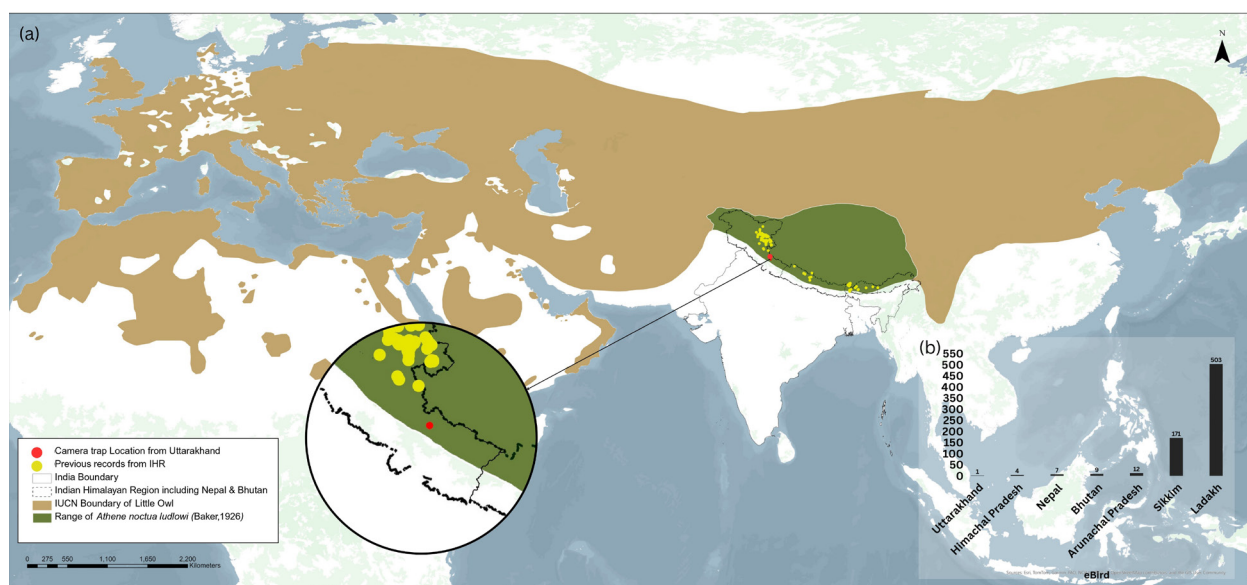


Image 3. a—IUCN range of little Owl *Athene noctua* (Scopoli, 1769) with the range of subspecies *Athene noctua ludlowi* (Baker, 1926), in green colour | b—Number of observations based on citizen science data in the Himalayan arc of *Athene noctua ludlowi* range. Sourced from eBird.

Cedrus deodara, *Pinus wallichiana*) at mid-elevations (2,000–3,800 m); high-altitude alpine and subalpine vegetation (3,500–5,000 m) with *Rhododendron* spp., *Betula utilis*, and alpine herbs and forbs; and a Trans-Himalayan landscape (3,500–5,200 m) represented in Nelong Valley with alpine desert steppe plants such as *Caragana versicolor*, *Acantholimon lycopodioides*, *Thylacospermum caespitosum*, *Rhamnus prostrata*, and *Artemisia brevifolia*. The alpine habitat surrounding the camera trap site supports a mosaic of herbaceous

cover and shrub thickets, which are known to harbour small mammal populations. Although direct rodent surveys were not conducted, the presence of burrow systems and frequent sightings of murid species during concurrent fieldwork suggest adequate prey availability for *A. n. ludlowi*. This aligns with the species' known dietary preference for small mammals, reinforcing the ecological plausibility of its occurrence in this region. Previous studies (e.g., König & Weick 2008; BirdLife International 2019) have emphasised the Little Owl's

reliance on rodent-rich habitats, particularly in montane and semi-open landscapes.

Despite its broad occurrence across the Himalayan arc, it remains one of the least studied subspecies of the Little Owl, with research largely restricted to scattered presence-only records. Citizen-science platforms such as eBird now provide important supplementary data, revealing that records are concentrated in Ladakh, followed by Sikkim, with Arunachal Pradesh, particularly the Sela Pass region, showing regular observations. In contrast, Bhutan, Nepal, and Himachal Pradesh report only a handful of sightings, though suitable habitats suggest a potentially wider distribution. A single record from Kalimpong, West Bengal, further indicates its occurrence in the eastern Himalaya (Image 3b).

This first photographic evidence of *Athene noctua ludlowi* from Uttarakhand addresses a key distributional gap within the Himalaya. Despite the subspecies remaining poorly studied, recent contributions from citizen-science initiatives have provided valuable supplementary data, particularly by involving local observers in remote landscapes. Ongoing integration of such participatory records with systematic field surveys offers a practical way forward for refining knowledge of its range and informing conservation planning.

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ravi@threatenedtaxa.org & ravi@zooreach.org

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