

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*: a first record for Manas National Park, Assam

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The Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* is a widespread winter visitor (September/October–March/April) to the Indian Subcontinent. It is recorded throughout the subcontinent as well as the entire Indian Union, together with Sikkim to eastern Assam, and Manipur, including Pakistan and Nepal (Ali & Ripley 1987). It occurs in a variety of habitats, from open grassy countryside with bushes, to tall grasslands on the margins of jheels, as well as along sparse scrubby hillsides. In Assam, it is relatively uncommon (Choudhury 2000).

On 22 February 2008, while looking for Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis* in Koklabari Agricultural Farm (26°45'15.6"N 91°11'38.3"E) at 0812 hrs, we saw seven Short-eared Owls. KAF is situated on the eastern boundary of the Bhuyanpara Range of Manas National Park. The area (9 km²) is mainly open farmland where paddy is the main cultivated crop.

The owls were flying around tall eucalyptus trees in the central portion of the farm, and two of them, after flying for some time, settled on the ground. The ground vegetation at that time was mostly 'naras' (the dry tuft remaining after paddy has been harvested). Once they had settled it was easier for us to see them clearly through binoculars. We observed them for nearly 45 min, and were able to identify them clearly. We could not identify the species initially, but were sure that it was not the Eastern Grass-owl *Tyto longimembris*, usually seen in the area; no doubt the size was similar, but the way it behaved (e.g., flying in the morning) was not usually seen in Eastern Grass-owls. Further, it had a pair of small 'ears' that is lacking in a grass-owl. We matched the species with the colour illustrations in Grimmett *et al.* (2001), and Kazmierczak (2000). There were two short blackish-brown, upright ear-tufts, above its yellow eyes. Wings and tail were barred with rufous and black. It had pale buff-brown, longitudinal streaks on its breast. In flight we saw the rufous dorsal, and white ventral sides of the pointed wings. There was a prominent dark bar across each black-tipped wing. Again, on 24 February 2008, at 0730 hrs, we saw those seven Short-eared Owls perched on the branches of the tall eucalyptus trees. Earlier Short-eared Owl sightings are confined to eastern part of Assam, mostly to Dibru-Saikhowa National Park (Das 2006), these sightings probably would be the first records of the species for Manas, as it was not listed by Choudhury (2006).

In 2009 we revisited the same site, and searched for the owls from 19–27 February, and again from 8–13 March 2009 and 31 March 2009 to 3 April 2009. However, we did not see them again. The Short-eared Owl occurs irregularly, its abundance

varying from year to year, and at times there have been occasional invasions by the species (Ali & Ripley 1987). However, Ranjan Das (*pers. comm.*; Das 2006) observed nine Short-eared Owls in Raidang grassland in Dibru-Saikhowa National Park for three consecutive years in March 2004, 2005 and 2006.

References

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Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* resting on ground.