Owls Around Pune

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Spotted little owl (Athene brama): This little owl appears to be abundant around Pune. Spotted owlet is found wherever there is a group of trees or a small patch of woodland. Within the city I have been able to see this bird in the Prabhat road and Cantonment areas; both fairly populated, but having bungalows and buildings with spacious compounds & large trees. Also on the city outskirts, such as Pashan and Aundh areas it lives in close proximity to man. A walk at late dusk in this area is always rewarded with a number of sightings of this bird. A pair or more owls are generally together on roadside poles, close to a lamp & are scrutinizing the ground below. I can roughly estimate a pair per 200 sq mts of this area.

Outside the city this owl generally keeps to a large tree like Mango or an Acacia, during the day. Such roosts have been seen near Baner, along the river near Aundh; near Pashan lake on a banyan tree. Three banyan tree roosts are to be found in the University campus. Near the National Defence Academy (NDA) again a mango tree is used as a roost. Near the Baner hill a number of pairs (4) roost communally, which is unusual for this species. They breed in a number of holes on the steep mud walls of gullies formed by erosion. To my knowledge, such a nesting site has not been reported so far.

In spite of the abundance of this owl not much is known about its nesting in Pune area. Probably because its nesting site is very well concealed. One site we discovered was by an unfortunate accident. It
was on a tall steel structure built to support four water tanks. The nest was in a horizontal hollow girder at the top, a site contested by Common Mynahs. Unfortunately a very young owl fell out of its nest from a height of 40 ft and died. Another nest was in a hollow of a tree trunk of a tall tree about 30 ft above the ground in the University campus.

Some juvenile spotted owlets are often found by people & are brought home in an injured state. The injuries are usually inflicted by boys throwing stones and not by mobbing by other birds.

Barn owl (Tyto alba): This owl appears to be not as abundant as the Spotted owlet, but nevertheless quite common. The density must also be less too and I would estimate a pair per sq km or more of Pune area. A ride around the city at night may show only one or two of these owls. They do not have favourite perches like the Spotted owlet, but are generally seen in flight in pursuit of their prey. On some occasions I have seen this owl in the most densely populated areas. For example, in densely populated areas such as the Laxmi road I have seen this bird once at around nine p.m. Another sighting was near the Shaniwar wada also in the same area. On more than one occasion I have seen a barn owl looking for prey on the tennis courts of the Deccan gymkhana. Besides these the regular sightings have been in the University, Aundh and Pashan areas. The owl generally emerges after dusk and flies straight to a perch, pauses there briefly and continues its flight, flying at a height of about 10 to 20 ft. I have never seen a barn owl roosting presumably because it hides in the deepest crannies in tall buildings or in their tiled roofs.

The only nest I have been able to observe was in a tall building in Spicer college (Aundh), This was in a hollow space under the tiled roof. We watched this nest for at least twenty days before seven young flew out at around 8 pm. During the period of observation the parents brought in food (usually rats or mice) at frequent intervals of one per hour.

Juveniles of this species are many times captured, because mobbed by crows they are injured or are driven into houses. They are always in a state of shock and attempts to feed them do not succeed. The injury is usually in the wing, sometimes if the wing is broken we have never been able to save the bird. The birds without any external injury usually fly away after recovering from the shock.

Great horned owl (Bubo bubo): This owl is perhaps the least abundant of the three owls. It is seen on all the hills surrounding the Pune city. Usually it is found on hills with only scrub cover or no cover at all. The roosts are usually in places such as quarries or some such rock faces, with bushes growing on ledges. Here they can spend the day in the shade. In these surroundings they are very well camouflaged. They are always to be seen in pairs, not far away from their roosting places. They do not appear to range over a wide area enabling a fairly accurate estimate of their numbers.

There is at least one pair of these owls on the baner hill, which can be easily disturbed in daytime during a walk on this hill. There is another pair on the hill behind ARDE (Pashan). One pair is found on the Vetal hill near the temple. One pair resides near NDA Pashan gate, one at Peacock Bay (NDA). Besides these there is one pair at Pachgaon Parvati and another in the Katraj valley. Perhaps a few owls stay close to the city as some immatures are also caught there. In spite of their confinement to particular areas, their nests are difficult to locate. One nest located this year (March '87) belonged to the pair at NDA (Pashan gate). This was in the stone quarry at the base of the hill, on a ledge on the rock face about 12 ft above the water level in the quarry. The ledge was hidden behind an outcrop of vegetation & could be located only after much effort. This nest produced two young which came out of the nest when they had grown all feathers except the horns yet were not able to fly. The pellets found near by were large and full of hair possibly of bandicoot and field mice, their skulls and bones were also present in some. The juveniles are quite often driven into houses and gardens by mobbing flocks of crows, usually between December and June. Sometimes they are caught in barbed wires while trying to evade the crows. Though the chances of survival of the injured owls are low, the uninjured owls are capable of flying away after a day or two of rest.