

Some observations on the Brown Hawk Owl (*Ninox scutulata hirsuta*)

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Introduction

The Brown Hawk Owl (*Ninox scutulata*) is widely distributed in well-wooded areas of the Oriental region (Konig *et al.* 1998). In Sri Lanka it is represented by the subspecies *hirsuta*, which is also present in southwestern India (Rasmussen and Anderton, 2005). It is distributed from lowlands to mountainous zone in well-wooded areas in Sri Lanka (Legge 1880). It is one of the few owls that can be seen in home gardens in Colombo.

A pair of Brown Hawk Owls are regularly heard and occasionally sighted in and around my home garden in Bomiriya, Kaduwela. The following observations are largely based on my random personal observations carried out up to November, 2006.

Figure 1. Brown Hawk Owl (*Ninox scutulata hirsuta*) October, 2006, Bomiriya, Kaduwela,



Photo (c) Amila Salgado.

Initial sighting

On 15 March 2006, I observed a Brown Hawk Owl flying from my home garden towards a neighbouring coconut grove around 6.15 p.m. It perched in a branch about 4 m from the ground in one of the trees. It then made several sallies and caught and fed on, what appeared to be 'coconut beetles' (*Oryctes rhinoceros* and *Rhychophorus ferrugineus*). Soon it was joined by another owl that is probably its mate and they were seen perched close together.

Moments later, the bird, which was sighted first made a sallying flight and returned to the perch with an insect, which looked like a 'coconut beetle' and offered it to the newly arrived bird. I was curious to find out whether this behaviour was part of 'courtship feeding'. However, no mating took place except for the fact that the donor maintained close proximity.

Day roost

As the bird was first sighted in my home garden, I was curious to find out its day roost. I therefore, searched possible trees in my garden without any success. However, I was able to see them regularly at dusk. Finally on 25 March 2006, I was able to discover the day roost by accident. It was in a dense live fence consisting of coffee trees (*Coffea arabica*) in a corner my home garden. It was about 1 m above the ground. This live fence was overrun by vines and the birds were seen roosting in an umbrella-like cover inside them. My initial discovery flushed them out as I had unknowingly got too close to them.

Unfortunately this live fence was reduced to a few trees by my neighbour and thereafter the bird was seen in another coffee tree in my garden on the 28 Sep, 2006 perched 2 m above the ground just 5 m away from its earlier roost. After a few days it had disappeared. Shortly afterwards, it was

rediscovered in a Mango tree (*Mangifera indica*) about 5 m above the ground under a well hidden shady spot. At the time of writing (November 2006) it could be seen singly or as a pair in this new day roost. As mentioned in the literature (Legge 1880, Konig *et al.* 1998) the Brown Hawk Owl will readily fly out of the roost if it is disturbed so observers should be mindful of this fact when approaching day roosts.

Emergence from the day-roost & feeding.

As stated in the literature (Legge, 1880, Henry 1971, Konig *et al.* 1998), the Brown Hawk Owls appear out of the roost at dusk when considerable amount of light is still available. According to my observations, after leaving the roost they almost always perch about 1-4 m above the ground. Then they make low sallying flights to capture various flying insects about 1-6 m above the ground. They capture them with their talons and return to a perch for feeding. When beetles are fed upon they can be seen breaking and discarding certain parts of their body first before nibbling at it. I have also seen them catching and feeding on moths. As mentioned in Konig *et al.* (1998), I have also found them to be more active during cloudy weather. On heavy rainy days they abandon their regular roost to select a more airy perch nearby about 4 m above the ground.

Threat from drongos

Their emergence out of the dayroost coincides with the last minutes of activity of several diurnal birds most notably White-bellied Drongo, which usually can be seen hunting for insects until it is very dark. One of the interesting things that I have experienced almost on a daily basis is the hearing of several White-bellied Drongos uttering a characteristic alarm call at dusk, which continues intensely on certain occasions.

After starting to observe the Brown Hawk Owls more closely, I found out that these alarm calls are actually mobbing calls directed mainly towards the pair of Brown Hawk Owls as they emerge from the day roost coinciding with the last few minutes of activity of the White-bellied Drongos. The drongos numbering 4-6 could be often seen trying to 'dive bomb' the owls and chase them from the area but eventually when the owls disappear from their sight the mobbing ceases.

Pellets

According to Legge (1880) they feed almost exclusively on beetles, moths and grasshoppers. However, Konig *et al.* (1998) reports that in addition to insects the diet of Brown Hawk Owls consisted of frogs, lizards, small birds, mice and occasionally insectivorous bats. I was able to collect several pellets of the Brown Hawk Owls under their dayroost and after studying them I was able to find the remains of Beetles only, which confirms my visual observations. Therefore, it may be possible to attract Brown Hawk Owls to coconut grooves by planting low perching posts as a means of effective biological control of these pests. This is provided that there are wooded habitats close by which could function as suitable day roosts for the owls.

Sightings after dusk & calling

I noticed that after feeding actively closer to the ground at dusk, they seem to move away from ground level when dusk has given way to complete darkness of the night. During this time their presence could be detected by their calls heard from heights of 10-20 m above the ground.

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