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Night of 24-25 March 2013. Al Hajar Mountains, Oman.

René Pop and I have been here for five nights, trying to get sound recordings and photos of Pallid Scops Owls for our new book *Undiscovered owls*. Pallid Scops are very hard to record, simply because they are so quiet. The microphones have to be within a tree or two of them to capture a full-bodied sound. I spent most of this evening lying on my back on a large rock looking up at the stars, hoping that for once they would hoot from the tree I had selected. They perched in it yesterday and the day before but needless to say, on those nights my mics were in other trees. Tonight, two Pallid Scops seemed to be very close to my tree. From the rock, I couldn't be sure how close. So when I heard that they had moved off, I walked up to the recorder at the base of the tree to listen. First though, I put on the headphones and listened to an amplified version of what was happening right at that moment. It was then I heard the mystery owl for the first time.

I heard it clearly, despite having to listen through a constant fluttering of Egyptian Fruit-eating Bats and a galaxy of crickets. The owl sounded like it was a long way off, and its three-part rhythm made me think of a *Strix*, but a very deep one, like a Ural Owl or deeper. It sounded not even remotely similar to a Hume's Owl, Arabian Spotted Eagle Owl, Pallid Scops Owl or anything else that is known to occur in Oman. Later, when I imitated its rhythm to René, my rendition sounded like a slow rendition of *Here comes the bride*. After a while the owl started to give a kind of pulsed hooting in regular bursts of about twelve hoots. At one point it was answered by a nasal, rising *NYEP* from the other side of the wadi that might have been a female. I even thought I could hear faint hooting from a third bird, very briefly.

What could it be? Was it an Asian species unknown from Arabia and unfamiliar to me, or had I heard a new species for science? I was already confident enough about this last possibility to call Arnoud. He is currently leading a tour in Morocco but rather wishes he were here!

Evening of 26 March 2013. Al Hajar Mountains, Oman.

Last night René and I came back to the same spot and listened for hours. I left the equipment working for the rest of the night and we went to get some sleep. This morning I picked it up and listened to little chunks, about ten seconds for every couple of minutes or so of the recording. No sign of the mystery owl. On the first four nights it was silent too.

In our hotel we have had internet access, allowing us to listen to our owl recordings online. None of the Indian *Strix* owls sound like our bird, nor does African Wood Owl, the only *Strix* from Africa. I know the Palearctic species well enough that I don't need to check those.

After finding nothing in last night's recordings, we've driven east. We had promised ourselves to go and find Crab Plovers near Ras Al Hadd, the north-eastern tip of Oman. We've failed to find any so far, and now I feel a bit silly. In the car, I had time to think through the implications of what I had heard. When René was driving I listened to the recordings, or what little I could hear of the faint owl above the sound of our Land Cruiser. I spoke to Mark who is excited too, and keen that we should get to the bottom of this. Tomorrow night is our last, and we have to be at the airport several hours before dawn. We'll drive back to the wadi and spend a few last hours there.

Wee hours of 28 March 2013, Muscat Airport, Oman.

A couple of hours ago I heard the mystery owl again at the same spot, but this time at much close range. It only called during the last half an hour before we have to leave for the airport, and it was still hooting up on the cliff as we drove off. We didn't manage to see it, but at least we now have much better sound recordings and we know which cliff it likes to hoot from. This time René heard it too. There is no doubt that The Sound Approach will be back. It's just a question of deciding who and when.

Night of 27-28 April 2013, Al Hajar Mountains, Oman.

A month has passed, and we're back. We've been listening for several nights at exactly the same location where I heard the mystery *Strix* owl in March. There's been no sign of it there, even after playing recordings from the car stereo. The torrential rain with thunderstorms on several nights probably didn't help. The wadi overflowed more than once, and rocks strewn along its course have been realigned.

Tonight we decided to try somewhere else. Just two kilometres down the road, an owl responded to our playback. Arnoud heard it first. He was listening through headphones, with his mics down by the side of the road. I managed to hear it too, but only after I noticed that he was waving frantically, trying to attract my attention without spoiling his recording. The owl made both of the hooting sounds that we heard in March, but with a more gruff-sounding, slightly deeper voice, suggesting to me that it could be a member of the opposite sex. Its faint hooting came from the top of a peak about 250m to the southeast. We drove slightly closer, not wanting the sudden appearance of human forms to scare it off. After further playback, it descended to a spot about 40m above the road. Using Arnoud's spotlight, we could see a plain-looking owl perched on a large rock, facing towards us. Shaped like a *Strix* owl, it lacked ear-tufts and appeared slightly smaller-headed than a Tawny Owl. It looked rather featureless at that distance, except for the presence of a dark breast band. Arnoud noted obvious longitudinal stripes through his stabilised Canon binoculars. As for me, I thought I could see some kind of horizontal striping just below the facial disk through my telescope, though I was trembling with excitement. Time will prove which of us saw correctly. Neither of us had anticipated this moment of truth, and Arnoud's camera was not ready. He acted fast, but it seemed like an age before the camera was ready. Fortunately the owl was still there, but just as he was focussing it slipped away into the night. No photo!

At least now we know for sure that we are dealing with a medium-sized, *Strix*-like owl. Imagine if it had been something else completely, like some kind of mammal! The moment of seeing it in the torchlight was tremendously exciting, because it confirmed that I had not been dreaming. This really does seem to be a new species of owl. We called Mark despite the late hour, and we sent a message to Håkan Delin in Sweden, who is illustrating our book. Both were thrilled for us!

Night of 29-30 April 2013, Al Hajar Mountains, Oman

Last night we heard nothing, but tonight we finally heard the new individual again, about 500 m south of where we heard it the other night. Sadly, we didn't see it and this was our last night, so we'll be going home without any photos. I wonder how many months it will be until we get some. The owls appear to spend most of their time up on cliffs and dangerously steep slopes full of loose stones. If they often came down into the more easily accessible parts of the wadi, we would surely have seen or heard more than one by now.

22 May 2013, Cabriz, Portugal.

Arnoud is back in Oman with his wife Cecilia. I didn't go this time, because I have some book writing to do, but also because the main objective now is to make some photos. We were pessimistic about making much progress this month. On our last visit, it was very frustrating to hear an owl only twice, despite so much effort, so I decided to wait to go back next winter when we expect the owls will be in full courtship. However, contrary to expectations, Arnoud and Cecilia have been hearing them for hours on end each night. I just found out that they have heard calls from three different territories, all in the same wadi.

24 May 2013, Cabriz, Portugal.

We are all delighted, because Arnoud has made the first photo, and the owl is a beauty! Here is what he wrote:

"On the fifth night, we heard the owls again at the March and April spots but, as in previous nights, they remained high on the cliffs without showing any interest in coming down.

“So, reluctantly, we decided that instead of luring the owls down we had to go up high. Despite high temperatures of 44C(!), I walked up from before sunset along the edge of the cliff where it was found in March, away from the road to the end of that long slope. I have no idea about the distance from the road (500 m?) but when it was dark I just waited for Cecilia to playback from the car down at the road. I had brought a laser pen to communicate as mobile phones did not work amidst the cliffs; our laser light language included two strokes of light meaning 'playback please' and more than 10 strokes meaning 'get help I fell down' :)”

“My first sighting was from very far away in torch light. First I thought that I had spotted a black goat grazing on the steep slope but then I noticed eyes in its tail! After a while, the bird flew in closer, still landing on the cliff, and I was again struck by it being so dark. I lost it again but after a while I realised the sound was coming from the cliff on the other side: it had flown overhead. I briefly saw it here again but every time I struck it with my spotlight, it flew off immediately. Later, I saw it several times flying high overhead in the moonlight. Four times, it landed close to me on a rock, just as it did in April. Nearly every time though, it flew off as soon as I switched on the powerful torch that I need for photographs.”

Fortunately, one time it did stay long enough for a couple of shots, and here is the one that Arnoud sent me. He was right about the vertical stripes. Perhaps I should get some stabilised binoculars like his!

26 May 2013, Cabriz, Portugal.

Arnoud has just sent a whole series of photos taken last night, which show virtually every feature of the same individual he photographed two days ago. He even managed to get some sharp photos in flight, giving us crucial information about the wings. It is very tempting to send them to friends, but we have agreed to keep this secret. We want to try to describe the new species with a minimum of fuss. There will be a lot of work to do, analysing our recordings and photos, if we want to prove beyond doubt that this is not a variant of some already known species of owl.

23 July 2013, Cabriz, Portugal.

Arnoud and Cecilia are back in Oman. It's still very hot there, and the owls are much less active than in May. Nevertheless, they have managed to get some more sound recordings and photos. The new photos were taken at the same location as in May and the bird sounded like the same individual, although its plumage is now tattier. Several dark patches in its plumage correspond to ones that were already present in the May photos. We have decided to make this individual our holotype, without making futile attempts to obtain it as a specimen. This is within the ICZN rules established for describing new species, although it will no doubt prove controversial.

24 September, Poole, UK.

Last night we told the folks in the Poole 'bird pub' about Omani Owl for the first time. The paper for Dutch Birding has been submitted, reviewed by three experts, resubmitted, proof-read, corrected, and is now at the printers. We have done all this in very short time, while still managing to keep it secret. Only a handful of people know. The guys in the pub had known we were up to something involving an owl, but suspected it was a proposal for splitting a known subspecies. Describing an entirely new species was not something they expected at all.

4 October 2013, London, UK.

As far as we are concerned, Omani Owl was 'born' this morning. The first copies of Dutch Birding have just hit Dutch doormats. In a few days some 2500 subscribers will have read the paper, and many others will have seen the pdf. Whether people agree with our proposal or not, the name *Strix omanensis* officially exists from today. I am in London for media interviews. We hope that the news is spread widely, and the species quickly gains wide

acceptance. As soon as it is recognised by the international community, conservation measures can be devised and more importantly, enforced.

I still hope to return to Oman during the coming 'winter'. I'd love to fill a few gaps in our understanding of Omani Owl sounds. Besides, I've still only seen it once at 40m distance, lit up fairly dimly in a spotlight. I also look forward to sharing the owl with new people. With their help, we may start to discover other breeding locations. I hope that by the time *Undiscovered owls* appears next year, there will be several new stories to tell.