

The Story of a Brown Fish-owl

Ketupa zeylonensis

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It was a windy night in the month of March 2007 in a tea estate in Morawaka, a low country tea growing area of the district of Matara in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka.

A gale had brought down an aged giant tree containing a nest which had been used by several generations of Crested Serpent-eagles. A lone chick was found in the woody waste. The chick was rescued by the animal loving proprietary planter Mr. Gamini Kulathilake. It was named 'Chooty Boy' [small boy] and was hand-reared with poultry meat. The bird soon grew to be quite large. An ornithologist friend who visited the Kulathilake family identified the bird as a Brown Fish-owl (*Ketupa zeylonensis*). "Brown Fish Owls breeds from February to May. They nest in hollow trees or in rock crevices close to water. The owls sometimes use the deserted nests of eagles, after carefully lining them with grass and feathers. The birds occasionally construct their own nests in the recesses of a large upright fork". [Vincent Legge - A History of the Birds Of Ceylon Vol: 1] On their friend's advice they changed the bird's diet from poultry to fish and shrimp, and altered the feeding hours from day to night-time. However this apparently did not suit the bird as it started feeding on its own at the roadside lamp post, feasting on the numerous insects which were attracted to the light, these included beetles and moths. This forest bird whose instincts could not cope with an urban habitat narrowly escaped injury or death from speeding cars and motorcycles on several occasions while at its nocturnal feeding.



Receiving Treatments after the Injury

One day the Owl did not return for its food. The distressed Kulathilake family distributed pictures of the bird around the neighbourhood in an effort to locate it. It was later found to be the centre of attraction at a local beer garden where it was being fed continuously. Its instincts confused, the stressed bird was rescued and handed over to the Wild Life Society of Galle, which is located at a forest reservoir where an abundance of Brown Fish-owls occur.



Feeding by hand



Back to its instincts

On the 23rd of July 2007 'Chooty Boy' arrived at the Wild Life Centre and was entrusted to the care of Mr Sameera Akmeemana. in the hope that it could be restored to its "wild state" This was no easy task but the dedication and perseverance of three persons, Mr. Madura de Silva [President], Mr. Mohammed Bahir [Manager Research] and Sameera [Research Assistant] paid off when the owl began to fend for itself.

Initially they had to study the habits and the feeding behavior of fish-owls in the available literature. Hand-feeding was minimized and its food varied from fish, beetles, moths and geckos to garden lizards. During the day it was left to its own devices, which meant less activity and no feeds. After some time the owl got used to the new feeding pattern.

During the second week it was encouraged to react to moving objects. Various objects from pieces of timber to rubber models of frogs, lizards, snakes, etc. were thrown near it to stimulate the bird's curiosity. Although it did not respond immediately, when small fish were introduced along with these items it started to react to any item to which it was introduced.

After a month of these familiarization exercises which were carried out indoors, the owl, now measuring about 45 cm, was taken outdoors. Small Sprats (*Sprattus sprattus*) were placed in a large basin of water and the owl was placed near this; after sometime it reacted by jumping in to the basin and feeding on the sprats, occasionally get-

ting out of the water to shake itself. After two weeks the bird was quite accustomed to water. By the third week the owl was taken to the shore of the nearby reservoir and it was shown live fish swimming in the water. This excited the bird but it refrained from getting into the water probably through fear.

During the fourth week it was encouraged to catch food on the wing. It turned out that this was its favorite way of feeding, and this paved the way for it to be taken to the reservoir in a boat where it was encouraged to catch fish thrown into the water, most of the fish were caught on the wing. It also learnt to collect fish floating on the water while in flight. Finally by the fifth week it was fending for itself, lizards, frogs and an assortment of creepy crawlies were its food. It roosted and perched close to the society building. It had regained its normalcy but on and off would come back in the nights to its human friends for food. At night the owl was attracted to lights and showed no fear of humans. Its interaction with people and its attraction to the younger members of the Society meant that it would not stay away from humans for long. This made the owl fly into other houses in the vicinity. Once it was brought back to the centre from a home which was two kilometres away.

Injury

On October 5th, 2007 news arrived that the owl was lying injured on the road side. It was brought to the centre at 4.30 in the evening with its left wing fractured, but with



Hunting on its own

no external injury. It was taken to the local veterinary surgeon, who could not help due to the lack of facilities.

On inquiries made from the National Zoological Gardens it was said that the owl could be accepted for treatment but would not be returned after treatment. The only option left was treatment at the Veterinary Department of the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. On October 10th, 2007 the owl underwent a two-hour surgery to repair the fractured wing. It is now recovering at the Wild Life Center and being fed on a diet which includes a supplement for bone growth.

Future

This is the story of the Brown Fish Owl of Hiare, Galle. The Society President Madura is keen to reintroduce the bird to the wild. He also hopes to educate the public on how to treat the owl humanely if it should visit their homes. One has to only hope that this is successful. The best news we could have regarding survival of the bird, would be to hear nothing of it in the future.

Conclusion

This owl created news and won the sympathy of the whole community due to its injury. The news items emphasized human compassion towards animals. It is to be questioned whether the action taken to save this bird, was in the long run to the bird's benefit. One could say that fostering the bird until it could fend for itself was right. This could be justified when considering the rapid urbanization and the dwindling of the available forest cover. Nevertheless several questions require an answer.

Was it correct to release the bird to the new habitat at

Hiare reservoir site, in view of the fact that Hiare already had an abundance of Fish-owls? Fish-owls frequently impact with motor vehicles in the vicinity of the forest.

Could the injury caused to this Owl be due to a road accident and not due to human action? Our knowledge of the behavior and habits of most nocturnal birds are minimal, and little or no scientific research on this species has been carried out in Sri Lanka. It was noted that other wild Fish-owls had called in close proximity to "Chooty boy" but it had shown no reaction or response to these calls. Are Fish-owls territorial? Were these other owls calling in defence of territory? Could not the owl's attraction to humans be a result of imprinting as Prof. Konrad Lorenz experienced with his geese? If so it may be that our owl may never interact with wild Fish-owls. Should we therefore, not allow nature to take its own course?

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the Wild Life Society of Galle and its President, Madura de Silva, Mohammed Bahir and Sammmera Akmmemana and the dedicated members who took time in providing information and photographs for this article. He thanks the family of Mr. Gamini Kulathilake of Wanchawala, Galle, for the care and dedication taken to care for the bird and for their love and concern for wild life. Thanks are also due to the surgeons at the University of Peradeniya who helped to restore the bird entirely free of charge. Finally thanks to my friend Mr. Wilson Kulasooriya for his advice and guidance.

Photo courtesy:
Wild Life Society of Galle



Learning to fish off the water