

Owl unseen for 150 years has been photographed in the wild for the first time

October 21 2021, by Hayley Dunning



Shelley's Eagle Owl. Credit: Dr. Robert Williams / Imperial College London

British scientists working in Ghana have rediscovered a "holy grail" giant owl that has lurked almost unseen in African rainforests for 150 years.

Shelley's Eagle Owl was spotted by Dr. Joseph Tobias, from the Department of Life Sciences (Silwood Park) at Imperial College London and leader of a UK-government funded field project studying biological impacts of agricultural development in Africa, and Dr. Robert Williams, a freelance ecologist from Somerset.

The bird was first described in 1872 from a specimen obtained from a local hunter in Ghana by Richard Bowdler Sharpe, curator of the bird collection at the Natural History Museum in London and founder of the British Ornithologists' Club.

There have been no confirmed sightings from Ghana since the 1870s, and very few glimpses elsewhere. The only photographs in existence were grainy images taken in 1975 of a captive individual behind bars at Antwerp Zoo and a pixelated blob from Congo in 2005 that is not certainly the right species.

There have been occasional reports over recent decades from people believing they have heard or briefly seen Shelley's Eagle Owl from a few different localities across West and Central Africa from Liberia to Angola. Most of these sightings are unconfirmed, and the species has become a holy grail for birdwatchers in Africa and beyond.

Large and distinctive

This all changed on 16 October 2021 when Dr. Tobias and Dr. Williams visited Atewa forest in Ghana and disturbed a huge bird from its daytime roost. "It was so large, at first we thought it was an eagle," Dr. Tobias said. "Luckily it perched on a low branch and when we lifted our binoculars our jaws dropped. There is no other owl in Africa's [rainforests](#) that big."

The pair only saw the bird perched for 10-15 seconds but in that time

managed to take photographs that confirm the identification due to its distinctive black eyes, yellow bill, and huge size, which in combination rule out all other African forest owls.

The fact that a predator of such massive size had become essentially invisible over a large swath of Africa fueled speculation as to its current whereabouts and reasons for its apparent rarity.

Dr. Nathaniel Annorbah of University of Environment and Sustainable Development, Ghana, said, "This is a sensational discovery. We've been searching for this mysterious bird for years in the western lowlands, so to find it here in ridgetop forests of Eastern Region is a huge surprise."

New hope

Shelley's Eagle Owl is officially classified as vulnerable to extinction with an estimated population of a few thousand individuals. The news of its continued survival in Ghana offers new hope for the species.

Although the Atewa site is threatened by illegal logging and bauxite mining, higher elevations still support large areas of evergreen forest. Environmental groups, such as the Friends of Atewa, are lobbying for the area to be designated as a national park.

Dr. Williams said, "We hope this sighting draws attention to Atewa forest and its importance for conserving local biodiversity. Hopefully, the discovery of such a rare and magnificent owl will boost these efforts to save one of the last wild forests in Ghana."

Provided by Imperial College London

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