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The Sichuan Wood Owl *Strix uralensis davidi* from the mountain forests of China/Tibet – no longer a ‘phantom’

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During a fieldtrip to the nature reserve ‘Lianhuashan’ (in Gansu Province, China) in 1995, a singing male Sichuan Wood Owl was detected by chance (Sun *et al.* 2001). On subsequent visits, courtship behaviour and the male offering prey to its mate was observed. By support of a British Petroleum Conservation Programme we mounted a number of huge nest boxes in 2004, as old hollow trees and big stick nests of raptors are nearly lacking in the reserve. In 2005 one pair bred in one of the nest boxes and reared two young; another box was used in 2007 and three young were reared. In 2006 a census of singing males confirmed at least four territories (four males and at least two females) in a wooded area of about 40 km² within the reserve. During this census we detected two young owls, just fledged from a breeding site in a steep rocky precipice (Scherzinger & Fang 2006).

Observations from the field confirm the striking similarity of the Sichuan Wood Owl and the Ural Owl with respect to both body size and shape. However, the plumage of the Sichuan Wood Owl is darker and with less contrast; the central tail feathers are typically brownish without darker bars. The male’s territorial song resembles the voice of the Ural Owl *Strix uralensis*, but with a shorter sequence of syllables (Scherzinger 2005).

During the breeding season the females at the nest sites were not as aggressive as female Ural Owls. Males showed distraction behaviours against intruders through intensive calling (territorial song, low pitched scale of ‘nest site demonstration’), by exposing itself on treetops, and by conspicuous flights nearby. The nestlings developed a dense mesoptile plumage, as in young Ural Owls. Nestlings left the cavity at about four weeks of age. As some of the fledglings were equipped with transmitters, we are just now acquiring the first information on dispersal.

Our colleague (S.-H. Tang) collected pellets and the remains of prey from the nest box in 2007; the list shows small hamsters, picas and birch mice, and suggests a rather limited spectrum of prey in the coniferous forest.

The Sichuan Wood Owl was collected first by Père David, a French missionary, during his expedition to central China in 1866. Since that time, only sporadic sightings have been recorded, which made the owl a poorly known ‘phantom’. Until recently, its taxonomic status was unclear, as it was described originally as subspecies of the Ural Owl as *Strix uralensis davidi*, but full species level has now been recommended, due to the totally isolated distribution as *Strix davidi* (del Hoyo *et al.* 1999).

The national nature reserve ‘Lianhuashan’ is linked to a holy mountain, visited by Buddhist pilgrims every summer. This tradition saved the mountainous forest from full exploitation for a long period of time. In Lianhuashan the owls’ habitat is composed of old coniferous forest (pine and fir trees), fragmented by small bogs and shrubs at dryer slopes, at about 2500 to 3000 m a.s.l. In nearly all mountainous areas of central China and Tibet, timber was harvested on a large scale until the end of the 20th century. As a result, the distribution of the Sichuan Wood Owl became dramatically fragmented, and only relict populations survived in isolated patches of woodland, which makes the owl vulnerable to extinction.

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