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February / février 2010

EAR-TUFTS IN A *GLAUCIDIUM* OWL

by Richard Farmer

Received 27 March 1984

The literature on African birds has tended to differentiate the small owls of the genera *Otus* and *Glaucidium* by the presence or absence of ear tufts respectively. Bannerman (1933) used tail spots and breast barring in keying the smaller owls, but Bates (1930) distinguished *Glaucidium* ("without ear-tufts") from *Otus* ("with long, outwardly projecting ear-tufts") by this character. Similarly Serle & Morel (1977) state that the Pearl-spotted Owlet *Glaucidium perlatum* is "without any ear-tufts" and Williams (1963) says it is "distinguished by lack of ear-tufts".

When photographs of a small owl at Lagos, Nigeria, clearly showed ear-tufts, its identity was therefore at first in doubt. In October 1982 at Tarkwa Bay, Lagos, a small owl was being mobbed by an army of birds. Several photographs were obtained with a Nikkon F photomic with Questar 3½ inch telescope.

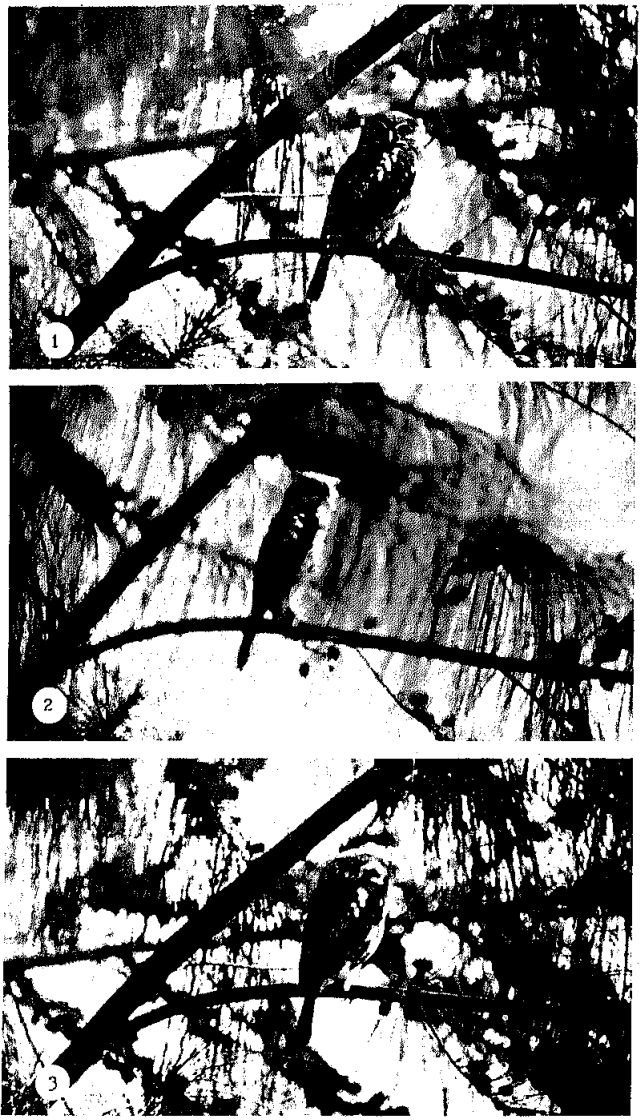
When the camera was being set up, mobbing ceased and the owl attenuated itself, drawing in its plumage and stretching its neck (keeping the head facing forward). Then it raised its ear-tufts to a horizontal level, and flew off. A photograph of the ear-tufts half raised was obtained (Fig. 1), but the sight of the full ear-tuft display was so startling that the camera was shaken. Although blurred (Fig. 2), the ear-tufts are clearly visible, and the bird quite strongly resembles a Scops Owl *Otus scops*.

Its identity being in doubt, photographs were sent to J.H. Elgood who consulted with G.D. Field. At first they took the bird to be one of the larger *Otus* species, but they had no way of judging size. Another photograph was therefore taken of a measuring tape at exactly the same place as the owl, which was calculated therefrom to have been *c.* 15 cm long. Consideration was given to two species (neither yet known from Nigeria: Elgood 1982), namely *O. icterorhyncha* and *G. tephronotum*. Meanwhile D.W. Snow identified the bird, from transparencies, as *G. perlatum*, although there still seemed to be some slight doubt, because of the ear-tufts.

With this possibility in mind, J.H. Elgood and I compared the photographs with skins at the British Museum (Natural History) and convinced ourselves that the bird was indeed a Pearl-spotted Owlet *G. perlatum*.

The crown is unspotted, indicating that the bird is immature. Nuchal 'eye'-spots, characteristic of several owls in this genus, were well developed, giving the bird a prominent 'back face' (Fig. 3). Another immature *G. perlatum* which I photographed in 1981 also had a notable 'back face'. At the Museum the only immature bird which we examined clearly showed the 'face' on the nape of the neck.

J.H. Elgood later examined all Museum holdings of West African *G. p. perlatum*. Of 53 skins, 8 (15%) showed a sharply defined 'back face';



Figures 1-3 Pearl-spotted Owlet *Glaucidium perlatum*, Lagos, Nigeria, October 1982. (1) Usual appearance, without ear-tufts showing; (2) with ear-tufts erected; (3) rear view showing nuchal 'face'.

29 (55%) had moderately contrasting 'back face' and 16 (30%) showed less contrast. Of the 8 strongly marked birds two were fully mature, with spotted crowns, and six, without crown spots, were immature. All the other 45 specimens had crown spots. This suggests that the nuchal 'face' of Pearl-spotted Owlets is a feature better developed in immature than adult birds.

Now that *G. perlatum* is known to possess erectile feathers on the sides of the crown, attention needs to be given to the whole genus. Perhaps a conspicuous 'back face', revealed under threat by elongation of body and neck, may confer some advantage especially important to the juvenile bird.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr D.W. Snow and the staff of the British Museum (Natural History) for the provision of skins, and to J.H. Elgood, Dr C.H. Fry and Dr J.F. Monk for comment on earlier drafts.

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