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Reprising the taxonomy of Cyprus Scops Owl *Otus (scops) cyprius*, a neglected island endemic

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Abstract

The endemic Cyprus Scops Owl *Otus (scops) cyprius* has been treated as a subspecies of the widespread Eurasian Scops Owl *O. scops* since at least the 1940s. However, its song is distinct from that of all other subspecies of *O. scops* in being double-noted, rather than single-noted. Its plumage also differs, most obviously in being consistently darker than other subspecies and in lacking a rufous morph. However, it shows no biometric differences from *O. s. cycladum* and southern populations of *O. s. scops*. It is also unusual among *scops* (*s. l.*) populations in being at least partially resident, although two specimens showing characters of this taxon were collected in Israel in early spring, and the numbers of birds that are resident on Cyprus appear to vary, with few recent winter records. It differs from *O. s. scops* by one synapomorphic nucleotide exchange in the analysed mitochondrial marker, indicating a recent separation. Given that large numbers of *O. s. scops* and *O. s. cycladum* pass through Cyprus on spring migration, and that the latter breeds in adjacent countries, it seems probable that *cycladum* would colonize the island, but for the presence of *cyprius*. That it does not do so, and that *cyprius* retains its distinctive song and plumage, suggests that isolating mechanisms exist. We recommend that *cyprius* be considered specifically distinct, as are other distinctively voiced insular *Otus* populations.

Key words: taxonomy, mitochondrial DNA, *Otus*, Cyprus, morphometric analyses

Introduction

Cyprus Scops Owl *Otus (scops) cyprius* (von Madarász, 1901), which breeds only on Cyprus, was initially afforded specific status, owing to its very dark coloration without buff, perceived larger size, and resident status (von Madarász 1901). The type specimen, a male collected on 8 February 1901 at ‘Livadia’, Cyprus, and held in Budapest, was destroyed by a fire in 1956 (L. Horváth *in* Flint & Stewart 1983) but another, a female, sent by Madarász and originally labelled ‘cotype’ is at Manchester University Museum (reg. no. B.10688; H.A. McGhie *in litt.* 2013). However, the latter cannot be considered to have type status, as its original label states that it was collected on 1 March 1902 (at Stavrovouni, Cyprus), and therefore could not have been to hand when Madarász described his new taxon, as the relevant issue of the *Természetráji Füzetek* containing his description is dated 10 June 1901. Cyprus Scops Owl was treated subspecifically by Vaurie (1960, 1965) and C.S. Roselaar (*in* Cramp 1985), both of whom considered it a well-defined island endemic because of its distinctive plumage, whereas König *et al.* (1999) initially united it with birds from Turkey (*O. s. cycladum*) but subsequently reinstated the last-named race for populations in Crete, the Cyclades, southern Greece and southern Turkey to Israel and Jordan (König *et al.* 2008). In addition, Eurasian Scops Owl occurs commonly on Cyprus as a passage migrant in Mar–early May and Sep–Oct; most are apparently *O. s. scops*, though *O. s. cycladum* also occurs (Flint & Stewart 1992).