PHILIPPE VERBELEN

new scops owl on Príncipe

Since 1928 there have been sporadic reports of a small owl on the island of Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea. However, it eluded collectors and birders until July 2016, when Belgian ornithologist Philippe Verbelen finally managed to record and photograph what is almost certainly a new species of scops owl.

Situated 215 kilometres off the coast of Equatorial Guinea, Príncipe is one of the two main islands comprising the nation of São Tomé and Príncipe. Most of this tiny country's 150 000 inhabitants live on São Tomé, the larger island at 845 square kilometres. Príncipe is much smaller (136 square kilometres) and supports only some 6000 inhabitants, who live mainly in the north of the island. The south supported plantation agriculture during the Portuguese colonial era, but now forest blankets the entire southern half of the island, most of which is protected in a national park.

Martim Melo first heard about a possible owl on the island from parrot collectors in 1998 while he was studying the local population of African Grey Parrots as a student at the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology. In 2002 Melo recorded a strange call in the lowland forest of southern Príncipe that he suspected might be the long sought-after owl. In 2007 he returned to the area with Martin Dallimer specifically to search for the putative owl, as well as the Príncipe Thrush *Turdus xanthorhynchus*. However, despite hearing the call at multiple sites during the day and at night, they were unable to locate its origin.

Intrigued, Philippe Verbelen led an expedition to the island to try to find this mysterious owl. Accompanied by Felipe Spina from Fauna and Flora International/Príncipe Trust, and Bikegila and Sátiro, former parrot harvesters who now work to conserve the forests on Príncipe, Verbelen camped for five days in the remote rainforests in the southern part of the island. Finally, after obtaining some fairly good recordings, he was able to lure at least two individuals down from the canopy by playing back their calls. Both individuals were rich rufous birds, resembling the rufous morph of the São Tomé Scops Owl *Otus hartlaubi*, which is fairly common on the neighbouring island of São Tomé.

The strongest evidence that the Príncipe scops owl is a distinct species comes from its call. *Otus* scops owls are notoriously diverse, differing mainly in their calls, which are innate (not learnt) and thus give a good indication of species limits. The Príncipe owl gives a series of soft '*hoop hoop hoop hoop*' notes, which are slightly deeper, shorter (less than 0.2 seconds) and repeated much faster (approximately one note per second) than the call of the São Tomé Scops Owl, which gives a call lasting about 0.35 seconds every 12 to 15 seconds. The Príncipe bird also appears to duet and has been heard to give a cat-like '*kee-a-u*' call as well.

Melo and Dallimer heard the scops owl calling from three sites in lowland forest in southern Príncipe, and Verbelen's team also heard multiple scops owls calling around their campsite at Rio Porco, suggesting that the scops owl is not uncommon locally in mature lowland forest. It might seem remarkable that the bird could have eluded detection for so long on such a small island, but there are several other cases of scops owls being overlooked on forested islands. For example, on the Comoro Islands, the Anjouan Scops Owl *O. capnodes* went unrecorded from 1886 to 1992 and an entirely new species, the Mohéli Scops Owl *O. moheliensis*, was discovered in 1995.

Announcing the owl's discovery at a conference on island biology held recently in the Azores, Melo said that although solving this long-standing mystery is exciting from an ornithological perspective, the most important result is that it confirms the immense conservation importance of Príncipe's lowland rainforests. If it indeed is a new species, it will be at least the eighth bird species endemic to Príncipe and will bring to 29 the number of species endemic to São Tomé and Príncipe – an unprecedented total for two small oceanic islands.

PETER RYAN