



Indian Rock Python (*Python molurus*) Preying on a Mottled Wood Owl (*Strix ocellata*) at Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary, Gujarat, India

Dipak Vadher¹, Pranav Vaghashiya², and Raju Vyas³

¹Yogeshwar bungalows 7, Meera Nagar Dargah Road, Junagadh, Gujarat-India (dipakvadher1990@gmail.com)

²Vasundhara Nature Club, Amrutam, 193/Bapunagar, Joshipura, Junagadh-362002, Gujarat, India (pranav4940@gmail.com)

³505, Krishnadeep Tower, Mission Road, Fatehgunj, Vadodara-390002, Gujarat, India
(razoovyas@hotmail.com [corresponding author])

The Indian Rock Python, *Python molurus* (Pythonidae), is a giant, nocturnal, non-venomous snake that is widely distributed in India (Daniel 2002) and is listed as Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List (Aengals et al. 2021).

On 2 April 2022 at Thaasa Beat, Jambudi Round, Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary (GWS), Junagadh, Gujarat, India (21.570381 N, 70.514821 E), the first author (DV) heard the screaming calls of birds from a large Banyan tree (*Ficus*

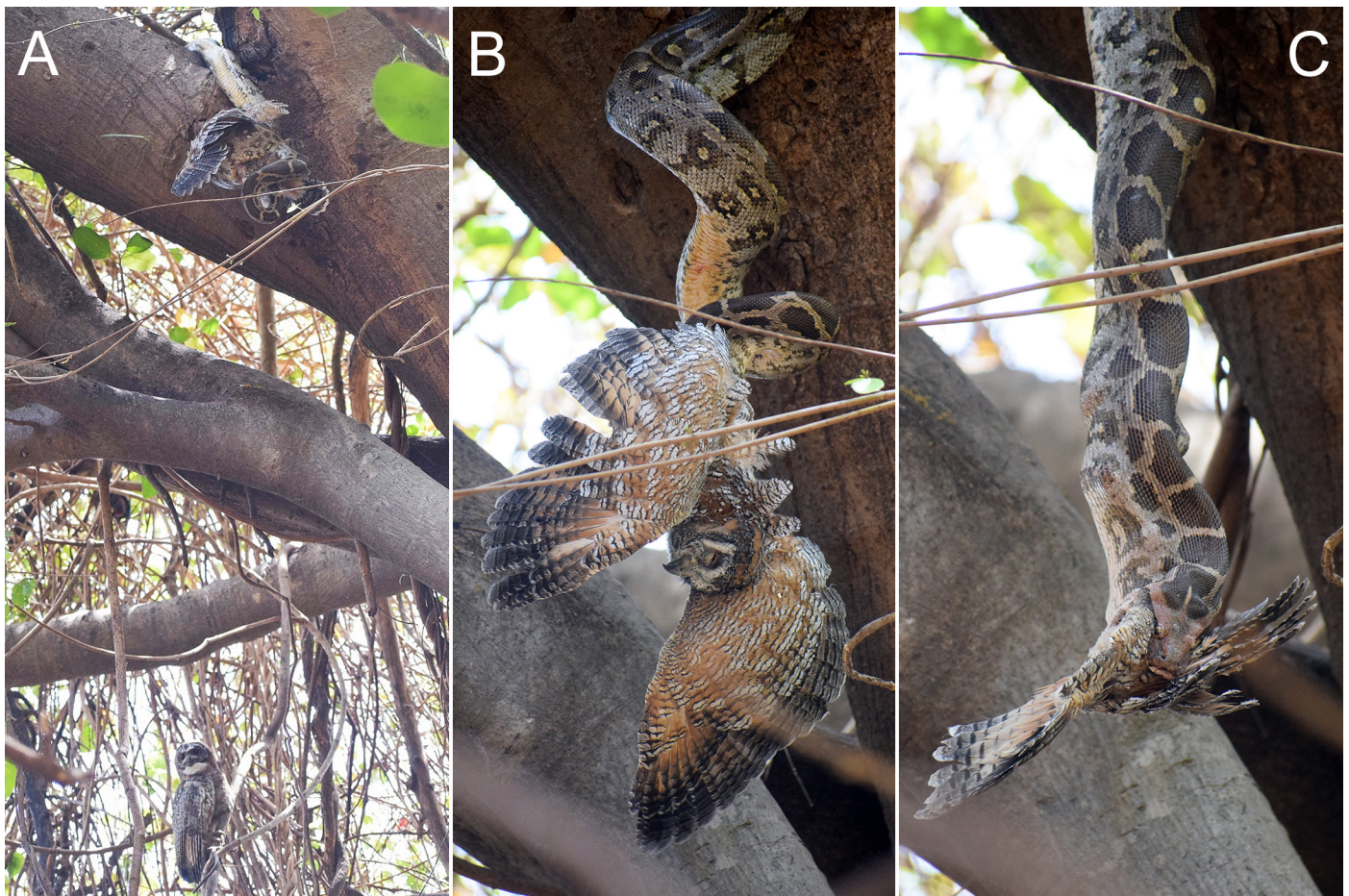


Figure 1. An Indian Rock Python (*Python molurus*) hanging from a high branch with its prey, and another Mottled Wood Owl (*Strix ocellata*) looking on (A); the Indian Rock Python holding a Mottled Wood Owl by its legs (B); and the Indian Rock Python devouring its prey (C). Photographs by Dipak Vadher.

benghalensis). After carefully searching the tree, he noticed a pair of agitated medium-sized owls screaming and flying around the same branch. We subsequently observed an Indian Rock Python (*Python molurus*) (total length ~2 m) hanging from a high branch with its prey, a Mottled Owl (*Strix ocellata*; Fig. 1A). The python had caught the owl by its legs, and the bird struggled while flapping both wings (Fig. 1B). After about 30 minutes, the python had ingested the entire owl (Fig. 1C). Throughout the process, another owl attacked the python, while continuing to scream. We identified the prey as a Mottled Wood Owl based on diagnostic characters from Grimmett et al. (2011). This species is widely distributed on the Indian Peninsula, including the Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary in Gujarat (Doshi 2021). This observation adds a new prey record to the diet of the Indian Rock Python.

The Indian Rock Python observed may have been foraging in the tree, as it can catch the owl from the tree's hollow that is used for roosting during the daytime. Murphy and Henderson (1997) mentioned pythons waiting in hollow trees to capture roosting birds, and we believe that this is the most likely explanation of what we observed.

Based on indirect evidence through the analysis of fecal samples, 23 vertebrate taxa (79% mammals, 17% birds, 4% reptiles) have been recorded in the diet of *P. molurus* at Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur, Rajasthan (Bhupathy et al. 2014). Via direct observations, Bhupathy et al. (2014) noted five diurnally active species of birds (Comb Duck, *Sarkidiornis melanotus*; Cattle Egret, *Egretta garzetta*; Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea*; Greater Coucal, *Centropus sinensis*; and

Grey Francolin, *Francolinus pondicerianus*) among the prey of Indian Rock Pythons.

Most owls are nocturnally active apex predators and consequently lack many predators (König and Weick 2008). Effective defensive capabilities also make them difficult to hunt and kill. However, a few mammalian species (e.g., domestic cats, coyotes, bobcats, and foxes) are capable of killing an adult owl and readily take young owls in unguarded nests (König and Weick 2008).

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the Deputy Conservator of Forests and Range Forest Officer, Wildlife Junagadh Division, Forest Department of Gujarat, for guidance and permission to conduct this study. We also thank the Principal Chief Conservator of Forest (Wildlife), Gujarat, for his support.

Literature Cited

- Aengals, A., A. Das, P. Mohapatra, C. Srinivasulu, B. Srinivasulu, G. Shankar, and B.H.C. Murthy. 2021. *Python molurus*. *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* 2021:e.T58894358A1945283. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2021-2.RLTS.T58894358A1945283.en>.
- Bhupathy, S., C. Ramesh, and A. Bahuguna. 2014. Feeding habits of Indian Rock Python in Keoladeo National Park, Rajasthan, India. *Herpetological Journal* 24: 59–64.
- Daniel, J.C. 2002. *The Book of Indian Reptiles and Amphibians*. Oxford University Press/Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai, India.
- Doshi, N. 2021. Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary. <<https://ebird.org/hotspot/L3313077>>.
- Grimmett, R., C. Inskipp, and T. Inskipp. 2011. *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press & Christopher Helm, London, UK.
- König, C. and F. Weick. 2008. *Owls of the World*. 2nd ed. Christopher Helman, London, UK.
- Murphy, J.C. and R.W. Henderson. 1997. *Tales of Giant Snakes*. Krieger Publishing Co., Malabar, Florida, USA.