

A Shelley's Eagle Owl *Bubo shelleyi* sighting from Cameroon in 2005

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Une observation du Grand-duc de Shelley *Bubo shelleyi* au Cameroun en 2005. Différents médias ont rapporté une observation récente d'un Grand-duc de Shelley *Bubo shelleyi* au Ghana comme étant la première donnée confirmée depuis 150 ans. Bien que cette espèce soit rarement observée, il existe plusieurs mentions du Cameroun qui ont été omises par ces médias. Nous corrigeons cette situation en décrivant une observation de 2005 dans la région de Zoébéfam dans le sud du Cameroun, et en rappelant quatre autres données du Cameroun.

Summary. A recent observation of Shelley's Eagle Owl *Bubo shelleyi* in Ghana was described erroneously by numerous media outlets as the first confirmed record in 150 years. Although it is seldom seen, there are several records from Cameroon that were overlooked by those reports. To correct this, we describe an observation from 2005 in the Zoébéfam area of southern Cameroon and reference four other records from southern Cameroon within the last 150 years.

Shelley's Eagle Owl *Bubo shelleyi* is a little-known forest owl with records / specimens from Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic (Holt *et al.* 2020). It has been seldom seen or heard, so much so that a sighting in October 2021 in the Atewa Range in Ghana (Tobias & Williams 2022) was noteworthy to the extent it was widely covered by press and media outlets, e.g., by the BBC (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/59027610>) and Newsweek (<https://www.newsweek.com/shelleys-eagle-owl-spotted-ghana-forest-150-years-icl-1641692>), which erroneously claimed it was the first confirmed record in 150 years, despite there being several published records in both the literature (Bates 1930, Good 1952, Gatter 1998, Languy 2019, among others) and on websites such as eBird (<https://ebird.org/species/sheowl1>) and BirdLife International (<http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/shelleys-eagle-owl-bubo-shelleyi/text>).

Here we provide details of a sighting of Shelley's Eagle Owl in Cameroon in 2005. A team of seven ornithologists was based, during 18–23 July 2005, at Bobo (02°39.283"N 13°28.267"E)—an ephemeral camp site by a *Raphia* palm swamp dissected by a stream c.16 km into mature forest from the nearest settlement, Zoébéfam, in southern Cameroon (Fig. 1). At this lowland rainforest site numerous studies have been

undertaken on birds of mature forest, some of which resulted in earlier observations of Shelley's Eagle Owl (e.g., Smith *et al.* 1997, Slabbekoorn & Smith 2002, Kirschel *et al.* 2009, 2011, Valkiūnas *et al.* 2009, Smith *et al.* 2013, 2021).

On 22 July 2005 at c.12.00 hrs, one of us (ANGK) upon exiting his tent saw a very large bird perched c.50 m above ground in an emergent tree. Raising his binoculars, it was immediately evident this was a large eagle owl *Bubo* sp. The rest of the team was notified (TBS, RNMS, D. Anye, A. Chasar, T. Dietsch & G. Valkiūnas) and all observed the bird. Its enormous size and dark eyes ruled out most other eagle owls, such as Akun Eagle Owl *B. leucostictus*, Fraser's Eagle Owl *B. poensis* that might be expected in primary forest, and Greyish Eagle Owl *B. cinerascens* of rocky outcrops and savanna (Borrow & Demey 2001). We determined quickly that the individual had to be one of two species, Shelley's Eagle Owl, a bird of lowland primary rainforest, or Verreaux's Eagle Owl *B. lacteus*, which occupies open thorny savanna (Holt *et al.* 2020) and which according to the literature is absent from southern Cameroon (Languy 2019). Other features that were immediately apparent were the overall dark brown coloration and the heavy dark brown barring on the underparts, which again differentiated it from *B. poensis*. Also noticeable were its eyelids, which were paler than the dark eyes. Pel's Fishing Owl *Scotopelia peli*, a bird tied to large flowing rivers, was also ruled out based on that species' different

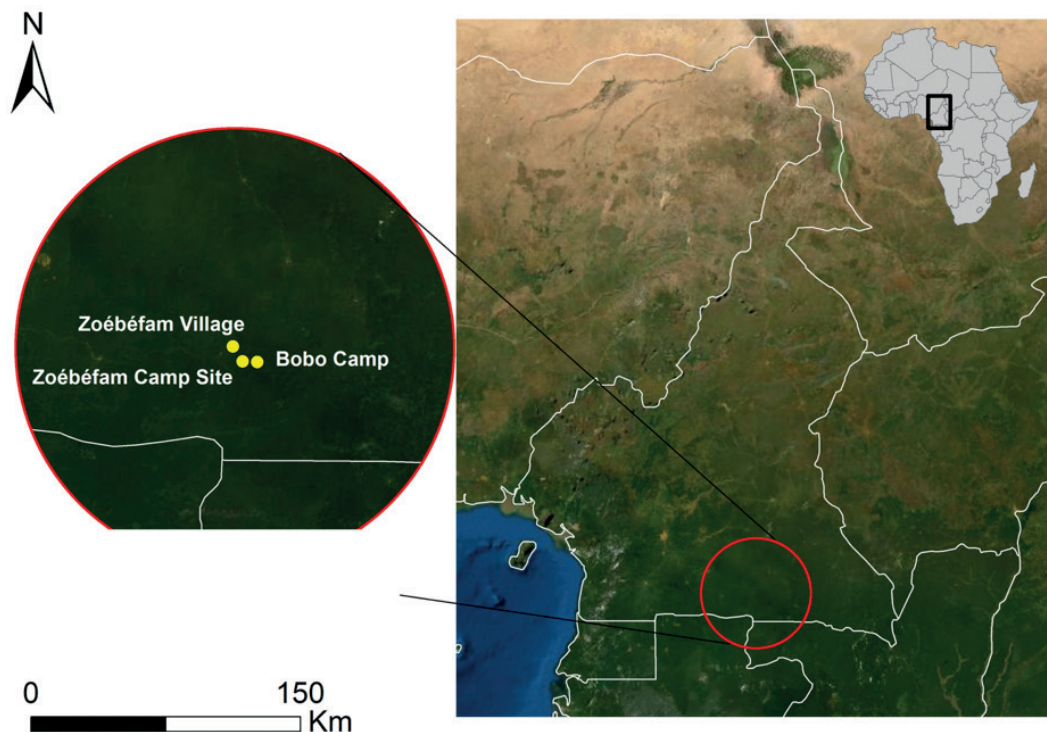


Figure 1. Satellite map of Cameroon (source: ESRI, DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, Earthstar Geographics, ONESAirbus DS, USDA) showing location of the Shelley's Eagle Owl *Bubo shelleyi* sighting reported herein, and inset (with scale bar) with the location of Bobo Camp and Zoébéfam Camp and village in Cameroon, close to the borders with Gabon and Republic of Congo.

Carte satellite du Cameroun (source : ESRI, DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, Earthstar Geographics, ONESAirbus DS, USDA) montrant l'endroit où le Grand-duc de Shelley *Bubo shelleyi* a été vu, et encart (avec échelle) montrant le campement Bobo, le campement et village de Zoébéfam au Cameroun, près des frontières avec le Gabon et la République du Congo.

Table 1. A list of previous observations of Shelley's Eagle Owl *Bubo shelleyi* in Cameroon (Languy 2019; M. Languy *in litt.* 2022).

Tableau 1. Liste des observations antérieures du Grand-duc de Shelley *Bubo shelleyi* au Cameroun (Languy 2019, M. Languy *in litt.* 2022).

Locality	Coordinates	Date	Observer
Zoébéfam	02°39'N 12°23'E	6 May 1999	H. Slabbekoom & J. Ellers (1999) <i>in</i> Languy (2019)
Dja Faunal Reserve	03°10'N 12°55'E	25 Jan 1999	H. Slabbekoom & J. Ellers (1999) <i>in</i> Languy (2019)
Bitye	03°01'N 12°22'E	Early 20th century	G. L. Bates (1930)
Sangmelima	02°56'N 11°59'E	Early 20th century	A. I. Good (1952)

shape, facial appearance lacking the characteristic disc of an eagle owl, orange-rufous plumage and mottled underparts rather than distinct regular barring.

We examined these characteristics while observing the bird for 20–30 minutes. It did not move from its perch during this time. We

attempted to document our record with a photo, but had only a Sony point-and-shoot pocket digital camera with a small zoom (3×), with which we could obtain only a blurred image, because of the camera's limitations in low light conditions. Nevertheless, using our binoculars the bird could be identified from the above-mentioned

morphological characters and comparison with the available field guide (Borrow & Demey 2001).

The next day we moved to another site, and following a quick inspection before departing, it appeared the owl had shifted roost site and was not visible.

Some years later, after mentioning the bird to various ornithologists who work in West and Central Africa, it became apparent that the species is seldom seen. This triggered a correspondence with the author of *The Birds of Cameroon* (Languy 2019) and his exhortation to document the record. Previously, four confirmed sightings of *B. shelleyi* had been reported in Cameroon since 1910 (Table 1). These include an earlier record in 1999, from the same area in Zoébéfam. There are two further records, from Kavanagh (1977) in October and December 1974 at Meket Mbeng, but these observations lack details, and one involved a bird whose face was hidden from the observer. Since the overall list in Kavanagh (1977) evidently contains misidentifications, we follow Languy (2019) in considering these observations as unconfirmed. Nevertheless, based on the number of records of the species in Cameroon, it might not be so rare, just difficult to encounter deep in primary forest, and the paucity of observations suggests it shuns areas disturbed by humans.

B. shelleyi may be seldom seen but could be detected more by voice. We did not hear its distinctive call, but others have elsewhere (G. Vande weghe, 1993, DR Congo, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S28157344>; C. Hines, 2018, Maiombe National Park, Angola, <https://xenocanto.org/437523>), and acoustic monitoring programmes (e.g. Blumstein *et al.* 2011) could help detect its presence in suitable habitat. Again, the extreme paucity of vocal records might be because it calls only at night deep in mature forest remote from human settlements.

In conclusion, we felt it important to compile this report, some 17 years after our observation, to further elucidate the species' occurrence. Although mistakes are made by all birdwatchers, some species are very distinctive; *B. shelleyi* is one of them, especially when seen well, as with our 2005 observation in suitable habitat in the species' known distribution (Borrow & Demey 2001).

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