

# The Long-whiskered Owlets

## *Xenoglaux loweryi* of Abra Patricia

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One of the world's tiniest and rarest owls has intrigued birders and scientists ever since its discovery in the mid 1970s. In recognition of its unique appearance, its scientific name means 'strange' or 'foreign owl'. Thereafter, the Long-whiskered Owllet went virtually undetected until the species' rediscovery in 2002. Nonetheless, until recently, this peculiarly charismatic owl had been seen by only a handful of ornithologists who had captured birds in mist-nets. However, as reported here, this near-mythical species has now become 'twitchable' to birdwatchers for the first time in history.

**'R**are, local, and very poorly known.' These are the first words of the account for the Long-whiskered Owllet *Xenoglaux loweryi* in the *Birds of Peru*<sup>12</sup> field guide. This peculiar owl, which is a very local resident of north-east Peru, is surely amongst the most enigmatic birds in the world. In common with the Loch Ness monster, tales were spun to fill in our lack of knowledge of the species, such as it being almost flightless or that the birds produce a series of whistles<sup>8,13,14</sup>, to mention but a few. The species inhabits wet cloud forest on ridgetops with bamboo thickets, and typically characterised by trees densely covered in mosses, lichens and orchids<sup>8,10,13</sup>. Long-whiskered Owllet is currently listed as Endangered by BirdLife International<sup>4</sup> whilst its behaviour and life history are still largely unknown.

### A brief history

The Long-whiskered Owllet was first detected during a Louisiana State University (LSU) expedition in 1976. On a rainy day in late August of that year, John O'Neill and Gary Graves were just preparing to relocate their camp to a less foggy location when Manuel Sánchez returned with a cloth bag containing a tiny, bare-legged creature with long facial plumes. The mysterious little owl that they had captured in a mist-net proved to be a species new to science and even a new genus to boot!<sup>10</sup>. They trapped a total of three individuals, one male and two females, at their campsite now known as 'Campamento Garcia', which lies north-

east of Abra Patricia, in San Martín<sup>10,14</sup>. In 1977 the bird was given the name *Xenoglaux loweryi*, a combination of the Greek words '*xeno*' (strange) and '*glaux*' (owl), on account of its distinctive morphology<sup>10</sup>, and '*loweryi*' in honour of their mentor George H. Lowery. Following the species' discovery, it took until October 1978 before it was refound, again by a LSU team, which mist-netted two individuals at the Cordillera de Colán, east of Bagua, Amazonas<sup>5</sup>.

However, ornithological inventories in the years following the successful LSU expeditions failed to encounter *Xenoglaux* and for over two decades the mysterious owl vanished from view. Ultimately, no fewer than 24 years later, the species was rediscovered in the Alto Mayo region, again being captured during a LSU expedition led by Dan Lane, in August 2002<sup>1,2,14</sup>. They kept the bird free flying in a tent, enabling Dan to obtain the very first sound-recordings of the species' vocalisations. Thereafter, it was not until February 2007 that a research team from Asociación Ecosistemas Andinos (ECOAN) led by David Geale and Juvenal Ccahuana observed an individual of Long-whiskered Owllet for the first time in the wild<sup>3,11</sup>. They encountered the species three times during daylight hours and several photographs were taken of an individual that they trapped in a mist-net. Then, in May 2008, Frank Lambert and Nick Athanas made the even more promising discovery of an individual just 50 m from the new ECOAN 'Owllet' Lodge at Abra Patricia<sup>6</sup>. This owllet responded well to



Long-whiskered Owllet *Xenoglaux loweryi*,  
Abra Patricia, San Martín, Peru, November 2011  
(Dubi Shapiro / [www.pbase.com/dubisha](http://www.pbase.com/dubisha))





Left: Long-whiskered Owlet *Xenoglaux loweryi*,  
Abra Patricia, San Martín, Peru, October 2010  
(Roger Ahlman / [www.pbase.com/ahlman](http://www.pbase.com/ahlman))

Below: Long-whiskered Owlet *Xenoglaux loweryi*,  
Abra Patricia, San Martín, Peru, September 2010  
(Dušan M. Brinkhuizen / [www.sapayoa.com](http://www.sapayoa.com))



playback of Dan Lane's recording of the captive bird, and the fortunate observers managed to see and make further sound-recordings of the species. Their sound-recordings were posted on [www.xenocanto.org](http://www.xenocanto.org), thereby becoming available to the wider birding public for the first time. Surprisingly, following their sighting, only a few birders heard the owl behind the lodge and even following searches with playback no visual observations have been made there since.

The next development in our story came in January 2010 when the owl was discovered at a remote site near La Esperanza, Amazonas, by Noga Shaneé and Shachar Alterman who even managed to capture the bird on video for the first time<sup>2,6</sup>. They encountered multiple territories and counted at least five different individuals on a single night! This major discovery was spread widely via various internet media by Gunnar Engblom. Observations of the near-mythical bird continued at La Esperanza, but reaching the actual site involved a long and strenuous hike via a muddy mule trail, which fact undoubtedly did not act as a spur to would-be observers. Nevertheless, the Long-whiskered Owllet had become 'available' to birders for the first time.

## Our encounter with the 'Holy Grail' of owls

In September 2010 we were leading a birding trip to northern Peru. Despite a long list of target species, without doubt Long-whiskered Owllet was the most desired of our desiderata. Finding it seemed like a long shot, especially given that Dušan had searched for it using playback in October 2008. However, the more recent sightings near La Esperanza gave us renewed hope. On 21 September we passed the community of La Esperanza where we attempted to find contacts for arranging an owl search during the following days. However, the key contact was not there and we were recommended to return the next day. In the late afternoon we arrived at the ECOAN Owllet Lodge, where we received a typically warm welcome from the staff. While our clients settled for a rest, we chatted with José about the latest sightings. "Apart from Yellow-scarfed Tanager *Iridosornis reinhardti* next to the dormitories nothing really noteworthy these last days", José told us. "And what about the *Lechusita*?", we asked. To our enormous surprise, José told us that the owllet had been heard about three weeks before along a freshly cut trail. The weather conditions looked

good and very soon the three of us agreed to scout the trail after dinner that same night.

The trail, now known as the Long-whiskered Owllet trail, starts near the parking lot and the first part is pretty steep downhill. Eye-shine at a clearing proved to belong to an Andean Potoo *Nyctibius maculosus*. We hiked at a swift pace and in record time we descended the valley to c.1,900 m elevation. A distant *Megascops* that came into playback of Cinnamon Screech Owl *M. petersoni* proved, in fact, to be a Rufescent Screech Owl *M. ingens*. After c.3 km, we reached the lower part of the valley where we started 'trawling' for the owllet. We used playback of the vocalisation recorded by Philip Johnson and Noam Shany at La Esperanza in June 2010, playing the call at the location where José had heard it but getting no response. Then, we tried a nearby site marked by a small clearing, playing the recording softly again. It was a huge shock when suddenly a Long-whiskered Owllet started to respond in the distance! Full of excitement we started whispering about our tactics. The bird started to call more intensely and we waited patiently until it stopped. Again we played the call softly. Our excitement (and tension) rose even higher when a second bird started calling from nearby! At this point we did not know what to do: 'You think the bird is within view? Shall we use our spotlights?'. We held our breath and waited a little longer until the bird started calling from just a few metres away. We 'opened fire' with our spotlights but the bird appeared to be within a dense patch of bamboo. It ceased calling and we had missed our chance. The next ten minutes passed in silence and we became nervous. Eventually, we moved back c.30 m to an area with less bamboo where we played the recording again. Luckily, one of the birds renewed its interest and flew in very close. Again we switched on the spotlights and this time the bird was perched right in front of us at eye level! A rush of adrenaline surged through us as we watched the tiny bird with our naked eyes at a distance of less than 4 m. Within seconds it had flown, but José managed to keep track of it with the spotlight. It landed on a branch higher up in a tree, whereupon the bird 'posed' for about five minutes. It was an unforgettable moment: watching the 'Holy Grail' of owls in full view, soaking up the prominent buffish-white eyebrows, its large orange-brown eyes, the fine whiskers extending from the facial disk, and the white spots on the wings. What a blast! Just before the bird flew again we managed to get some photographs of it. As we hiked back to the lodge, we felt simultaneously relieved and



overwhelmed. To our great surprise we heard another Long-whiskered Owlet along the trail just 1 km from the lodge, so we decided to reserve this individual for a 'twitch' by our clients!

The following morning we tried for Ochre-fronted Antpitta *Grallaricula ochraceifrons*, a species that was first discovered during the same expedition that led to the Long-whiskered Owlet being found by O'Neill and Graves in 1976<sup>9</sup>. Again luck was on our side as we watched a pair of this rare species just opposite the lodge. At breakfast we informed our group of our owlet sighting, which unsurprisingly produced a considerable degree of excitement. Therefore, the following night we took them to the nearest Long-whiskered Owlet territory. This individual had been calling of its own accord, so we were reasonably confident of our chances of luring it. On arriving at the spot, the bird responded promptly to a bout of playback and the excitement started all over again! However, it took c.30 minutes for the owlet to reach viewing range and during our first attempt with the spotlight we were unable to detect the bird. The trees were high and densely vegetated with mosses and bamboo, making it difficult to locate such a small bird. Fortunately, the owlet persisted in calling and during our second try with the spotlight we found it. There it was, a Long-whiskered Owlet, facing us and looking us straight in the eye. Everyone secured brief but good looks at the bird before it flew. Mission accomplished! Back at the lodge we celebrated becoming the first tour group to see the owlet.

## Seeing Long-whiskered Owlet

Sightings of Long-whiskered Owlet have continued at Abra Patricia and following our observations in October 2010 several other tour groups have seen the species at the same presumed territories. Follow-up sightings have also come from around La Esperanza<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, seeing a Long-whiskered Owlet is still difficult and, as often is the case with 'owling', luck and persistence are needed. To date, very little is known concerning the species' ecology, population and occurrence. The available records indicate an elevational range between c.1,800 m and 2,400 m, but the Long-whiskered Owlet's precise (seasonal?) movements remain shrouded in mystery. The species appears to prefer mature forest and the recent records of territorial birds suggest that 1,900–2,000 m might be the optimal elevation. Use of playback has been successful in locating birds at night, but in general the species seems to respond only occasionally. Playing back the call softly and with moderation

Getting there: ECOAN's Owlet lodge and reserve are located along the main highway, about two hours from Moyobamba or 4–5 hours from Tarapoto. Several of the Abra Patricia sites listed in Valqui's bird-finding guide<sup>14</sup> are now protected within ECOAN's reserve. To make reservations at the Owlet lodge, e-mail ECOAN at [reservas@ecoanperu.org](mailto:reservas@ecoanperu.org). See also [www.conservationbirding.org](http://www.conservationbirding.org) and [www.ecoanperu.org](http://www.ecoanperu.org) for more information.

seems to work best. Recent observations also suggest that the sexes differ vocally, with the male having a louder call (J. Altamirano Guerrero pers. obs.). Its nocturnal activity might be influenced by the presence of larger owls (which are potential predators).

Video of a Long-whiskered Owlet has recently been posted on the internet (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRq-6iDP15g>), filmed by Guy Foulks (of the US Fish & Wildlife Service) in November 2011.

Setting up a trip to look for the owlet is not difficult with several options now available. The most comfortable lodging is at the ECOAN Owlet Lodge at Abra Patricia. For more information and reservations visit their website ([www.ecoanperu.org](http://www.ecoanperu.org)) and see the 'Getting there' box. A trip to the La Esperanza area must be pre-arranged by contacting Noga Shanee of Neotropical Primate Conservation (NPC). Another accessible locality for Long-whiskered Owlet was recently found by the NPC near the village of Yambrasbamba, Amazonas<sup>7</sup>. This site is next to a well-maintained dirt road and is perhaps *the* most accessible for seeing the owlet. Noga can be contacted via the NPC website ([www.neoprimate.org](http://www.neoprimate.org)). Chances of seeing the owlet are probably equally good at Abra Patricia and La Esperanza. Both areas possess multiple territories and at both sites local people can inform observers about the latest sightings. Either one could serve as a backup site if the other fails to produce. Searching for new territories in suitable habitat using playback might also be rewarding. It would be unsurprising if a territory is even found near the main highway in the future. All sightings of Long-whiskered Owlet should be reported and future observations will hopefully provide a better understanding of the species' biology.



The río Mayo Valley is the type locality for the sought-after Long-whiskered Owllet *Xenoglaux loweryi*, San Martín, Peru, September 2010 (Dušan M. Brinkhuizen / [www.sapayoa.com](http://www.sapayoa.com))

Habitat of Long-whiskered Owllet *Xenoglaux loweryi*; subtropical cloud forest in the río Mayo drainage, San Martín, Peru, September 2010 (Dušan M. Brinkhuizen / [www.sapayoa.com](http://www.sapayoa.com))





Above: Ochre-fronted Antpitta  
*Grallaricula ochraceifrons*,  
Abra Patricia, San Martín, Peru,  
January 2011 (Roger Ahlman /  
[www.pbase.com/ahlman](http://www.pbase.com/ahlman))

Left: Long-whiskered Owlet  
*Xenoglaux loweryi*, Abra Patricia,  
San Martín, Peru, July 2011  
(Boris Herrera Vallejo)

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