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Journal of Threatened Taxa

The international journal of conservation and taxonomy

www.threatenedtaxa.org

ISSN 0974-7907 (Online) | ISSN 0974-7893 (Print)

VIEW POINT

**CAN PHILATELY SENSITISE PEOPLE TO WILDLIFE / CONSERVATION?
AN INTRODUCTION TO THEMATIC PHILATELY AND A VISUAL TREATISE
CONCERNING THE VARIETY OF PHILATELIC MATERIAL AVAILABLE ON
OWLS (AVES: STRIGIFORMES)**

M. Eric Ramanujam

26 July 2016 | Vol. 8 | No. 7 | Pp. 8989–9003
10.11609/jott.2479.8.7.8989-9003



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ISSN 0974-7893 (Print)

CAN PHILATELY SENSITISE PEOPLE TO WILDLIFE / CONSERVATION? AN INTRODUCTION TO THEMATIC PHILATELY AND A VISUAL TREATISE CONCERNING THE VARIETY OF PHILATELIC MATERIAL AVAILABLE ON OWLS (AVES: STRIGIFORMES)

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OPEN ACCESS



DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.11609/jott.2479.8.7.8989-9003>

Editor: Stephen D. Nash, Stony Brook University, New York, USA.

Date of publication: 26 July 2016 (online & print)

Manuscript details: Ms # 2479 | Received 21 December 2015 | Final received 20 June 2016 | Finally accepted 12 July 2016

Citation: Ramanujam, M.E. (2016). Can philately sensitise people to wildlife / conservation? An introduction to thematic philately and a visual treatise concerning the variety of philatelic material available on owls (Aves: Strigiformes). *Journal of Threatened Taxa* 8(7): 8989–9003; <http://dx.doi.org/10.11609/jott.2479.8.7.8989-9003>

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Funding: None.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no competing interests.

Author Details: M. ERIC RAMANUJAM has been a wildlife illustrator for over two decades, and has a background in the advertising industry. Since 1997 he has been involved in full time conservation and research. His major sphere of interest is the natural history of the Indian Eagle Owl *Bubo bengalensis*. From the time he was a young adult, he has been a keen philatelist and has won many state and national titles. He gave up competitive philately after winning the gold medal at the nationals (INPEX 1993).

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank P. Karunakaran, Sekar Babu Nagappa and Tushita Singh for helping me in the production of this article, particularly the Images and Image layouts.



Since the world's first postage stamp (the 'Penny Black' issued by Great Britain on 1st May 1840 and featuring the profile of Queen Victoria) the majority of the early stamps depicted busts of reigning monarchs. But as time passed, these miniature works of art began to have a wider range of designs. Though busts and coats of arms predominated, bears appeared on provisional stamps in St. Louis in 1845, the 'Basel Dove' (symbolizing peace) was issued by Switzerland in the same year, the 'Three Penny Beaver' was issued by Canada in 1851, and the 'Black Swan' by Western Australia in 1854. All these are collector's items today, and command prices at auction of many thousands of pounds, but it was heartening to know that some individuals and organizations identified themselves with their native wildlife to go to the extent of portraying these animals on their first postage stamps.

British India narrowly escaped. Though the Scinde District had its own special issues since 1852, it was decided that British India should have its own prepaid stamps. In 1853 the decision was taken to have 'proofs' made of a 'Lion and Palm Tree' for a half anna stamp. These were engraved from steel on thin laid bitonne paper in various colours and presented for official sanction. At the same time a steel die was engraved for a one anna value stamp with the head of Queen Victoria wearing a Gothic Crown. The Lion and Palm Tree lost out to British royalty, and in 1854 the first stamps were issued depicting the head of Queen Victoria (Anonymous 2005).

During the early days of stamp collecting (as philately is known), collectors concentrated on stamps of the whole world, as at that time there were comparatively few issues. This would be impossible today due simply to the quantity of stamps being churned out - one has only to peruse the stamp catalogues to realize the enormity of the situation (e.g., Gibbons 2015). Hence collectors began concentrating on a geographical area, a particular country or period of time. Though the first category has few followers (again due to the sheer numbers of stamps being issued), there are many in the latter two, defined as 'traditional philatelists', and many fine collections exist to date in nearly all parts of the world wherever collectors had access to the material.

In the early 20th century a few philatelists decided to organize their collections based on the design of the stamps rather than their country of origin. These early pioneers were dubbed 'thematists' in Europe and 'topical collectors' in the USA. Thematic, or topical, collecting has been around for over a century, although it has burgeoned since WWII (Hayward 1998). Animals,

plants and birds provided the most material to collect, and other philatelic material was soon added to the collections to enhance their appeal, and make them more interesting - for example, postal stationery, hand stamps and booklets. In fact, the range of collectible material has become so vast that FIP, the governing body of international philately, had to step in and restore order by drawing up 'codes of conduct for exhibitions' under its aegis. To a person intending to take up the hobby it is imperative to consult some seminal works and updates on the subject (Gupta 1989; ven den Bold 1994; Morris 1998) and more importantly understand the complexity of philatelic material, and the special terms associated with the subject (Mackay 1987). To reiterate: the essence is 'philatelic material', and picture postcards and other ephemera do not belong to philately, though they may have gone through the post. One should be particularly wary of what is referred to as 'undesirable' or 'black-listed stamps': some countries or provinces (often without a postal system) issue stamps that have no postal validity; these are targeted towards the unsuspecting collector who purchases them believing them to be the genuine article. A casual perusal of the Appendix section in a Stanley Gibbon's Simplified Catalogue will show one the so-called countries to be avoided when collecting stamps.

The thematic collector is primarily concerned with the subject portrayed on the stamp and other philatelic material, and not usually with geographical area or date of issue, and collecting by subject is the ideal format to attract new members to the hobby. Choosing a theme to collect is a personal choice. The subject one chooses may be work-related: a structural engineer may collect 'bridges', a doctor 'medicine', a driving instructor may form a collection on 'the history of the motor car' and a wildlife biologist a collection on his preferred area of specialty. I would personally warn the biologist not to try to tackle the entire gamut of wildlife - it seems to be the most popular subject at this point in time. The choice is vast, ranging from evolution to, well, you name it, and specialisation is the key as there is a plethora of literature to fall back on for guidance and identification (e.g., Arakawa 1979; Bearn et al. 1977; Ridgeley & Eglais 1984; Eriksen et al. 1988; Lera 1995; Springer & Raash 1995; Walker 1995; Aggersberg 1999; Phillips & Waddell 2003; Wright 2014). Perhaps one may have wanted to do something such as go exploring with Charles Darwin or Alexander von Humboldt, which is of course not possible, and hence thematic philately offers such people a fulfilling 'route of discovery' - in choosing a theme, especially concerned with the natural world,



Image 1: Owls in human culture. 1: The Owl of Athena: In Greek mythology, a Little Owl *Athene noctua* (etymology: *Athene* from Athena, and *noctua* meaning nocturnal) accompanies Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Because of this association, the bird has been used as a symbol of knowledge, wisdom, perspicacity and erudition. 2: The association of owls with darkness, their human-like faces and eerie calls got them the undeserved reputation for being evil, or associates of evil beings. The French poet, Charles Pierre Baudelaire (1821–1867), in his work ‘The Flowers of Evil’ refers to owls, among other animals, including cats, as associates of evil women. 3: In spite of their evil reputation, in many cultures owls are still regarded as symbols of literary importance. 4: One such example is the poet Matthias Claudius (1740–1815), better known by his penname ‘Asmus’, who is represented by an owl, walking stick and satchel on this stamp released to commemorate the 150th anniversary of his death. 5: The artist and writer Albert Engstrom’s (1869–1940) self-portrait shows him with his pet Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo*. These stamps were released to commemorate his birth centenary. 6: The best known of Eskimo artists, Kenojuak Ashevak, produced this famous stonecut print titled ‘The Enchanted Owl’. When asked why she chose to represent the owl in this way she replied “to drive away the darkness”.

imagination is the only limit.

Stamps and other philatelic items not only provide the means of effective communication but also serve the cause of conservation, both in the field of sensitizing the general public to the fate of the threatened environment or biota but also raising funds (Eckert & Grobois 1999; Ramachandran 2009; Forsman et. al. 2012). Even semi-postal and non-postal ‘cinderellas’ have been effective in generating funds. The classical example sited of late is the 2011 issue by the US Postal Service with the help of WWF, Fish and Wildlife Service and some other conservation-based NGOs. This semi-postal stamp which costs 60 cents generated a revenue of \$ 1.5 million in one year itself and will continue to be in circulation until the year 2017 as per the ‘Multinational Species Conservation Fund’, which was an Act of Parliament passed with

overwhelming bipartisan support (Anonymous 2011). However, philatelic material had even earlier been instrumental in fund-raising: a case in point was, and continues to be, the series of stamps issued concerning WWF which continues to generate considerable awareness, which in turn will impact funding (Groth 2013); India, too, has issued a set of four stamps on the Asiatic Lion *Panthera leo persica* in 1999. Fund-raising is of crucial importance in conservation, and even postal departments are realizing the need to contribute, which is heartening. Some countries are even releasing limited edition art prints whose sale proceeds benefit wildlife.

My present area of scientific research is centred on owls, hence I naturally began to acquire philatelic material on these birds, casually at first, but more intensively later. Here I use imagery with supplementary



Image 2. Barn Owls (Genus *Tyto*). The family Tytonidae is distinguished by a serrated comb on the middle claw. 1: Common Barn Owl *Tyto alba*. 2: African Grass Owl *Tyto capensis*. 3: Greater Sooty Owl *Tyto tenebricosa*.



Image 3. Scops and Screech Owls (Genera *Otus*, *Megascops*, *Ptilopsis* and *Mimizuku*). All other owls belong to the family Strigidae and lack the serrated middle claw. Scops owls are small- to medium-sized owls almost circumpolar in distribution. 1: Common Scops Owl *Otus scops*. Note the attachment at the bottom called a ‘tab’ – only the top and bottom rows of the sheet of stamps carry the tab, and hence these are more sought after by philatelists. 2: Collared Scops Owl *Otus lettia*. 3: African Scops Owl *Otus senegalensis*. 4: Philippine Scops Owl *Otus megalotus*. 5: Luzon Scops Owl *Otus longicornis*. 6: Eastern Screech Owl *Megascops asio*. 7: Northern White-faced Scops Owl *Ptilopsis leucotis*. 8: Giant Scops Owl *Mimizuku gurneyi*.



Image 4. Large Owls (Genus *Bubo*). These are the world's largest owls, and some are capable of killing jackals and young deer, though their main prey is rodents, except in the case of fishing owls which subsist largely on aquatic animals. 1.1: Eurasian eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* - nominate race *B. b. bubo*. 1.2: *B. b. omisus*. 1.3: *B. b. sibiricus*. 1.4: *B. b. hemachalana*. 2: Pharaoh Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus*. 3: Spotted Eagle Owl *Bubo africanus*. 4: Cape Eagle Owl *Bubo capensis*. 5: Barred Eagle Owl *Bubo sumatrensis*. 6: Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus*. 7: Phillipine Eagle Owl *Bubo philippensis*. 8: Brown Fish Owl *Bubo zeylonensis* (the image occupies only a part of the stamp's area and is too small for absolute specific identification. It could also be the Indian or Rock Eagle Owl *Bubo bengalensis*). 9: Blakiston's Fish Owl *Bubo blakistoni*. 10: Pel's Fishing Owl *Bubo peli*. 11: Snowy Owl *Bubo scandiacus*.



Image 5. Wood Owls (Genus *Strix*). 1: Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*. 2: Ural Owl *Strix uralensis*. 3: Spotted Wood Owl *Strix occidentalis*. 4: Barred Owl *Strix varia*. 5: Great Grey Owl *Strix nebulosa*.

text to take readers through my experiences concerning these collectables, and I hope it inspires some to take up the hobby of thematic philately. The identifications are based on present updated international literature, which takes into account molecular analysis (Konig & Weick 2008; Mikkola 2012).

Once a basic collection has been formed, a collector may be keen to display or competitively exhibit his or her items. For that it is better to join a philatelic society where one can be guided by seasoned philatelists, and who can introduce one to other like-minded collectors. As the level of competition increases, one will have to resort to specialized literature concerning guidelines for exhibiting. The Federation Internationale de Philatelie (FIP) has put together special guidelines: General Regulations for the Evaluation of Philatelic Exhibits at FIP Exhibitions (GREV) and Special Regulations for the Evaluation of Thematic Exhibits at FIP Exhibitions (SREV). I have chosen not to elaborate on these regulations



Image 6. Owlets and other small owls (Genera *Glaucoedon*, *Athene* and *Aegolius*). 1: Cuban Pygmy Owl *Glaucoedon siju*. 2: Pearl-spotted Owlet *Glaucoedon perlatum*. 3: Collared Pygmy Owl *Glaucoedon brodiei*. 4: African Barred Owlet *Taeniglaux capense*. 5: Little Owl *Athene noctua*. 6: Burrowing Owl *Athene cucularia*. 7: Northern Saw-whet Owl *Aegolius acadicus*. 8: Tengmalm's Owl *Aegolius funereus*.



Image 7. Long-tailed Owls (Genus *Ninox*). These medium-sized owls have comparatively longer tails than other owls, which enable them to maneuver among trees and foliage. 1: Unidentified Boobook Owl - either Southern Boobook *Ninox boobook* or Morepork *Ninox novaeseelandiae*, or some race or new species inhabiting Norfolk Island. This unseparated strip of stamps of different designs depicting various views of the owl is called a 'se-tenant' (from French meaning 'joined together'). 2: Christmas Hawk Owl *Ninox natalis*. Note the dividing strip between the pair of stamps – this is called a 'gutter pair' and occurs at the junction where two sheets of stamps meet. 3: Powerful Owl *Ninox strenua*.



Image 8. Medium-sized Owls (Genus *Asio*). 1: Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*. Note the 'tab' on the left of the stamp. 2: African Long-eared Owl *Asio abyssinicus*. 3: Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*. 4: Marsh Owl *Asio capensis*.

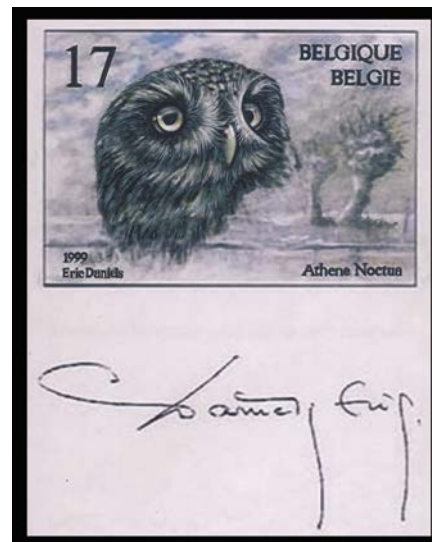


Image 9. The making of a postage stamp – Design. The basic concept for a design is that a postal department would call for an artist or group of artists (many of international repute) to submit designs. From these, 'Essays' would be created to resemble the stamps that are about to be printed, and these submitted to a panel which would choose the suitable version in their wisdom. Depicted here is an unaccepted Essay submitted by Eric Daniels depicting the Little Owl *Athene noctua*. The Belgian stamp of the Little Owl on Image 6 was the ultimate design, also by Eric Daniels, that was accepted and printed.



Image 10. 'Die Proof'. Earlier, when monochrome printing was in vogue, 'Colour Trials' in various hues would be prepared from the accepted Essay, but in these times of multicolour offset printing the accepted Essay is simply converted to a 'Die Proof' (often printed on thick card, when it is called a 'Die Card') and then submitted for final ratification. Shown here is such a 'Die Proof' depicting the Eurasian Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.



Image 12. 'Thematic Error'. Sometimes, in spite of all measures undertaken, some errors crop up once the stamps have been released. Errors fall into different categories – in this instance, we are discussing a 'Thematic Error', that is to say, that there has been a mistake concerning the species depicted on this stamp from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The stamp contains the inscription 'Bubo bubo', but as is widely known, the Eurasian Eagle Owl nests in sheltered rocky places, and is not a tree-hole nester as shown on the stamp. Furthermore, the adult feeding the young resembles a Scops Owl, most probably the Common Scops Owl *Otus scops*.



Image 11. 'Printer's Proofs' and 'Progressive Printer's Proofs'. Once the printing process begins, images are prepared, each image devoted to a separate colour. In the beginning the three primary colours, viz. yellow, cyan and red (1, 2 and 3) are prepared, and impressions taken by the printers for checking – hence these are called 'Printer's Proofs'. Then, these are superimposed upon one another (4) to see the effect and determine whether additional colours are necessary. In this case it was decided to use brown. (5). Finally, black was used along with the country's name (6) and the final result achieved (7). Impressions are taken at all stages by the printers, and these are termed 'Progressive Printer's Proofs' or 'Progressive Proofs'. After perforation, the stamp depicting the Burrowing Owl *Athene cunicularia* was issued (8).



Image 13. First Day Cover. To commemorate the date of issue of a stamp or set of stamps, postal departments of most countries issue a First Day Cover (FDC). This cover, hand-stamped (nowadays ‘machine cancelled’ to minimize time taken) includes the cancelled stamp or stamps, and in addition carries an image. This FDC from Czechoslovakia contains the stamps of the Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* and Tawny Owl *Strix aluco* stamped by an owl in flight (species not identifiable) and the cover design shows an owl, most probably the Little Owl *Athene noctua*, at the nest in typical defensive posture, with wings spread out.



Image 14. Miniature Sheet. To accompany the regular stamp sets, sometimes postal departments also issue some collector’s items, which in addition to showing the bird on the stamp include extra attached designs, usually depicting a different image to that on the stamp. Shown here is the stamp of the Barn Owl *Tyto alba* perched on a post in its typical attitude, while the accompanying design on the sheet shows it hunting.



Image 15. Se-tenant Miniature Sheet. Some postal departments make miniature sheets more attractive and meaningful by depicting more than one stamp on a single sheet. Shown here is a typical scene from a European woodland, depicting a Tawny Owl *Strix aluco* on the top row second stamp. It is accompanied by other animals from its habitat, including its prey the Garden Dormouse *Eliomys quercinus* on the stamp below the owl. Other denizens include the European Pine Marten *Martes martes*, Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*, Northern Goshawk and Stag Beetle *Lucanus cervus*. But one thing mystifies me: why should an African country like Ghana issue stamps on European woodland species?

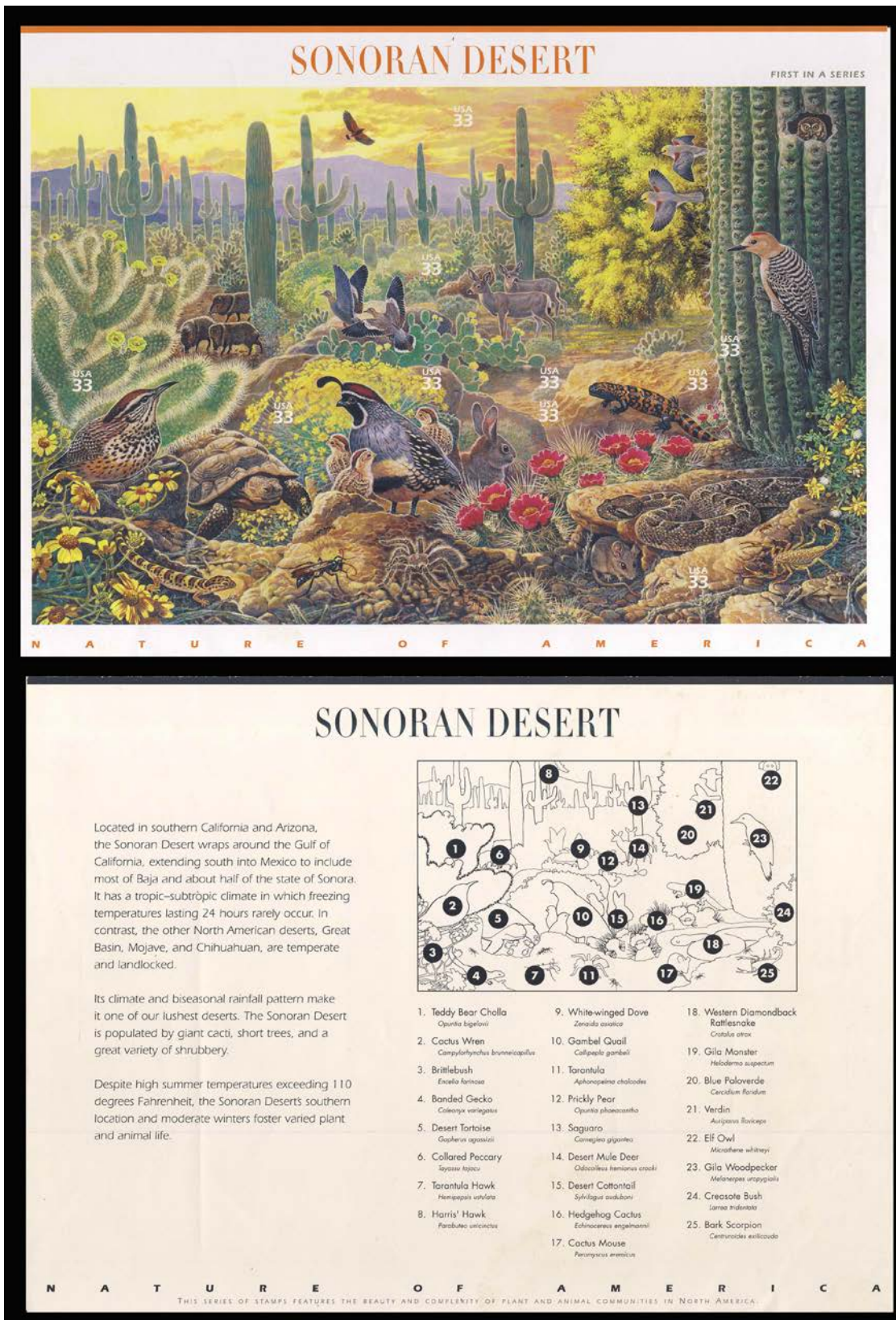


Image 16. Self-adhesive Miniature Sheet. The USA has always been a pioneer in stamp design, and this is a typical example – the first in a series of self-adhesive miniature sheets depicting wildlife in various habitats. In this scene of the Sonoran Desert, note the Elf Owl *Micrathene whitneyi* at the top right corner. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it is the smallest species of owl in the world, but nests in hollows of the world's largest cactus, the Saguaro.

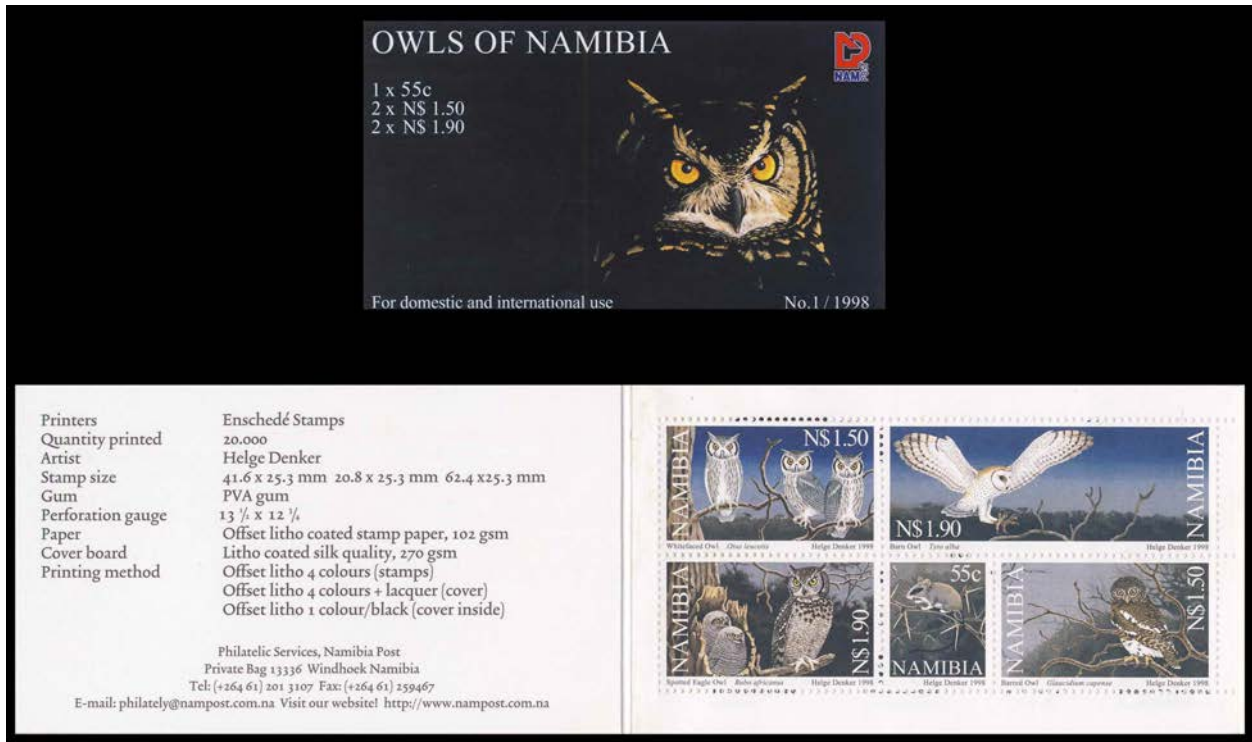


Image 17. Booklet. Some countries produce stamps in the form of booklets, originally for a matter of convenience before the computer age, but now as collector’s items. This booklet from Namibia, designed by Helge Denker, was voted the best example designed in the year 1998. It depicts a *Bubo* (unidentifiable species) on the cover, and the stamps inside depict the Southern White-faced Owl *Ptilopsis granti*, Barn Owl *Tyto alba*, Spotted Eagle Owl *Bubo africanus* and African Barred Owlet *Taenioglaux capense*.



Image 18. Pictorial Cancellations. Theme-related cancellations are an integral part of stamp collecting. This cancellation was probably inspired by Harry Potter’s Snowy Owl ‘Hedwig’, but the exact species remains a mystery, since it is overtly stylized and has a prominent rim round the facial disc.



Image 19. Maximum Card or Maxi Card. These cards are issued by postal services but can also be done privately – meaning that a collector who has a number of postcards can create a maxi card by choosing the right card, taking it to the post office on a particular stamp release date, affixing the required stamp at one corner and getting it hand stamped. There are only two rules: the first is that there should be a common connection between card, stamp and cancellation (in other words, all must depict the same species) and secondly, the card should not be the replica of the stamp and should show another facet of the species depicted – in this case note the difference between the stamp and cancellation of the Barn Owl *Tyto alba* on the stamp and cancellation with the design on the post card.

since they are beyond the scope of this article, and because I was primarily concerned with the scope of thematic philately influencing wildlife and conservation education. I have principally confined myself to giving a brief synopsis of materials and methods concerning owls, since there are just a handful of known collectors internationally who specialize in this particular subject.

Thematic philately may prove to be one of the keys to appeal to potential collectors. How can one sustain



Image 20. Sheetlet. Usually postal departments issue large sheets of stamps which cannot be exhibited on a page while exhibiting. To overcome this some philatelically sympathetic postal departments have come up with sheetlets like this one depicting the Snowy Owl *Bubo scandiacus*.

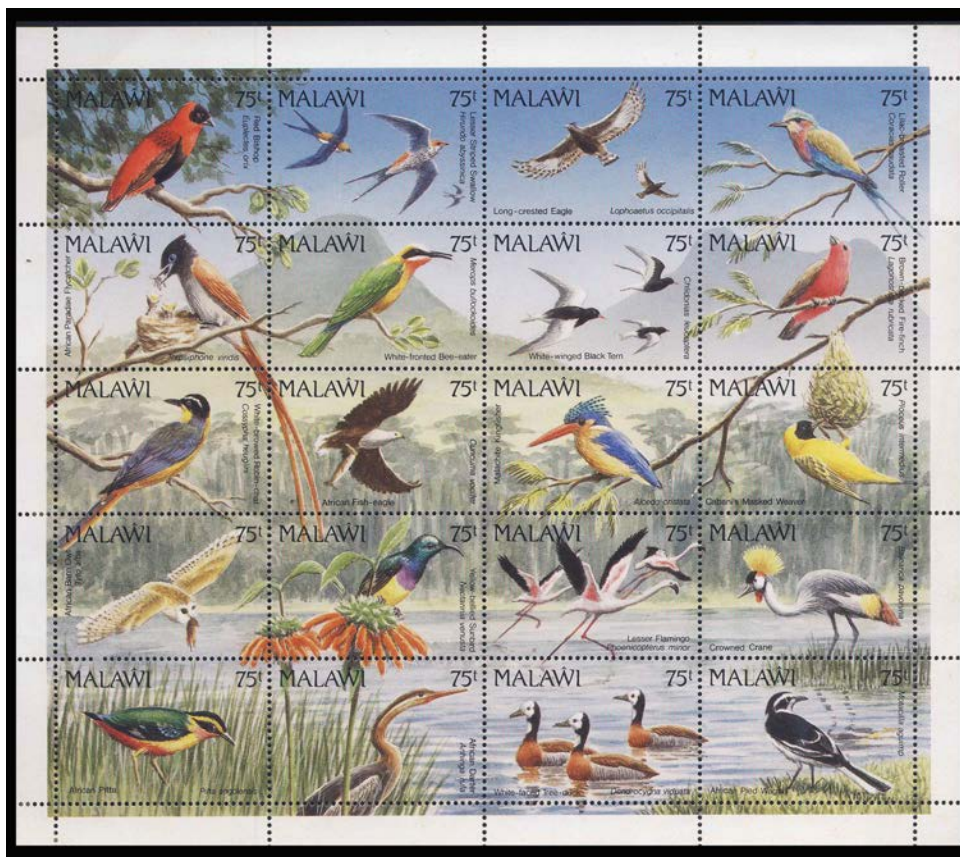


Image 21. Composite Sheetlets. Some postal departments have gone a step ahead and have combined different designs to come up with eye-catching combinations, like this one depicting an African wetland habitat. Note the Barn Owl *Tyto alba* with prey in its mouth on the stamp of the fourth row.



Image 22. 'Black-listed Stamps'. As mentioned earlier these are undesirable issues created to hoodwink beginners. The species depicted are the Brown Fish Owl *Bubo zeylonensis*, Snowy Owl *Bubo scandiacus*, Oriental Bay Owl *Phodilus badius* (interestingly, the only 'stamp' that depicts a representative of the genus *Phodilus*) and Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*. These 'stamps', which amount to nothing else but labels and have no philatelic significance, were actually embossed and printed on silver foil!

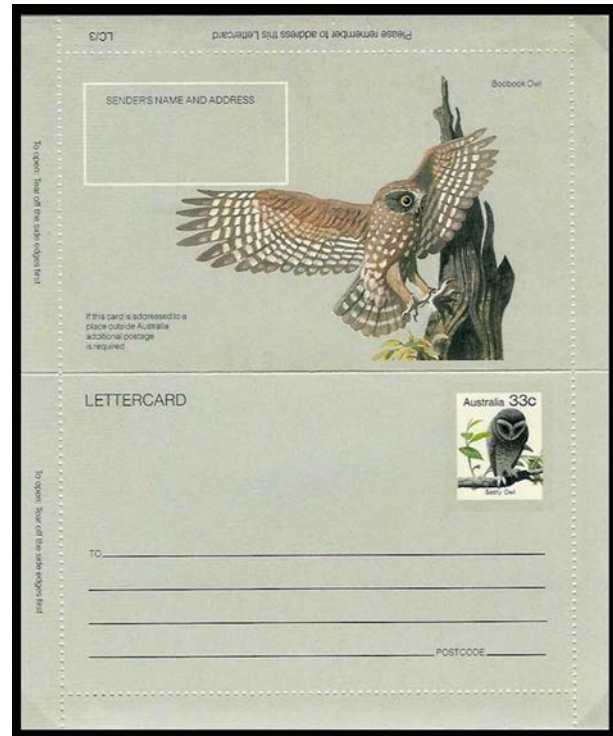


Image 23. Postal Stationery. Any item, whether it is an envelope, letter sheet, post card, lettercard, aerogram or wrapper that carries an imprinted stamp or inscription indicating a specific rate of prepaid postage is considered postal stationery, and forms an integral part of a philatelic collection. Shown here is a lettercard depicting a Red Boobook Owl *Ninox lurida* and Lesser Sooty Owl *Tyto multipunctata*.



Image 24. Joint venture by Canada Post and Calgary Zoo. Canada Post, in association with Calgary Zoo, had a special programme highlighting one of Canada's rarest birds, the Burrowing Owl *Athene cucularia*. Grade 6 students from Calgary Academy participated in the zoo's 'Flying Free' programme and learnt about avian flight, and how it differs from the flight of other creatures. The students visited the zoo's Burrowing Owl exhibit, and received copies of this miniature sheet depicting the four stamps issued to draw attention to the dwindling numbers of owls and other flying species in Canada. The success of the programme has enabled Canada Post to issue stamps every year on wildlife to commemorate 'Stamp Collecting Month'. In addition to the Burrowing Owl the other three stamps depict Taylor's Checkerspot Butterfly *Euphydryas editha taylori*, Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii* and Prothonotary Warbler *Protonotaria citrea*.



Image 25. Highlighting the fate of extinct taxa. A miniature sheet issued to highlight the extinction of species which was a quite popular series among collectors over a few years. The set highlighted New Zealand animals, and this one depicted the South Island Whekau or Laughing Owl *Sceloglaux albifacies albifacies* (the North Island subspecies *S. a. nidificans* is also extinct) and New Zealand Grayling *Prototroctes oxyrhynchus*. First described in 1845, *S. albifacies* was declared extinct by 1914, but there was hope until recently that it still survives (Williams & Harrison 1972).

‘collecting’, however? After all, philately has been called the ‘Hobby of Kings’, and it entails some fundamental expenditure to enable one to realize a certain degree of fulfillment and success, and furthermore it does not involve any substantial monetary gain, even if one gets an international award – the bottom line is that it is financially draining as a ‘stand alone’ concept. One compensation for this may be the satisfaction one derives when one’s collection has been given a degree of recognition and, if one is a conservationist, the degree of impact it has on those who view and appreciate a collection. Owls are definitely not a priority of specialization among thematic philatelists, but a degree of success has been achieved by some. One noteworthy case is Jesse Chevrier from Canada, whose exhibit was given the 2013 ‘Youth Grand Champion of Champions’ award by the American Association of Philatelic Exhibitors (AAPE).

Finally, I would like to convey my best wishes to those who get into competitive philately. After all, thematic



Image 26. Raising awareness / funds through non-postal / semi-postal ‘cinderellas’. Cinderellas brought out by the National Wildlife Federation were a huge commercial hit in the late 1970’s, and probably influenced the Species Conservation Funds Semipostal Stamp Act. One of these in the set-tenant sheet (folded for obvious reasons) depicts the Burrowing Owl *Athene cunicularia*. These are not ‘black-listed stamps’ since there is no intention to mislead collectors, but if included in a competitive exhibit, they must be limited in number and listed as semi-postal (just as we mention biases in this journal). Sometimes it may even be possible to have them used on the cover, along with regular valid stamps, for purposes of publicity, and if that is pointed out it, it is usually appreciated by the jury.

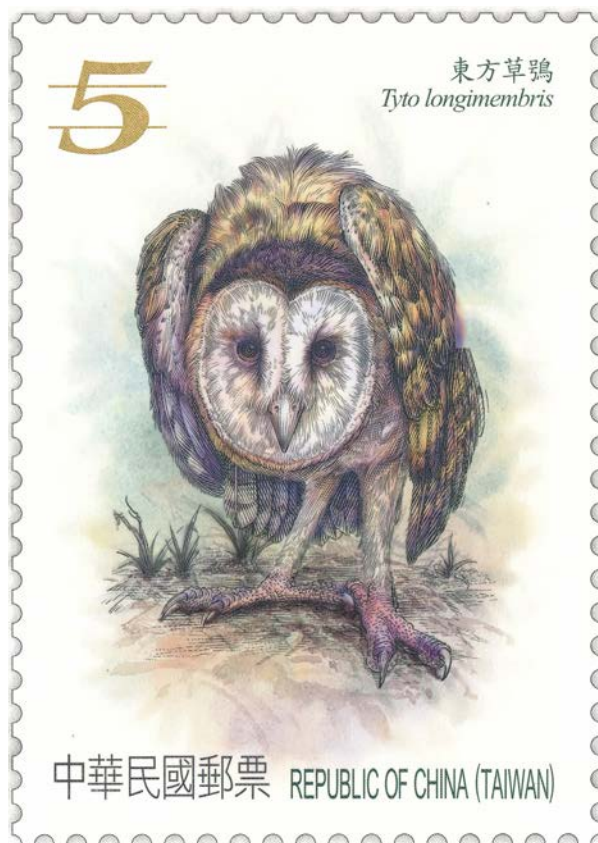


Image 27. Raising funds through limited edition collector's items. The Taiwan Postal Service issued a set of 12 limited edition art prints-cum-post cards in 2015 depicting owls to commemorate the 30th Asian International Stamp Exhibition. Part of the proceeds of this sale, which took the form of an auction, was donated to the 'Vanishing Species Benefit Fund'. This particular one depicts the Eastern Grass Owl *Tyto longimembris*. The portions in black are embossed, which lends added impact to the image.

philatelists owe Mary Ann Aspinall Owens (1928–2005) a lot for popularizing thematic philately (especially among those collectors concerned with wildlife) through her extraordinary collection of elephant-related items. In 1969, she was awarded the Distinguished Topical Philatelist Award by the American Topical Association, and in 1978 she was elected to the Wisconsin Philatelic Hall of Fame. Her crowning glory came when she was named to the American Philatelic Society Hall of Fame posthumously in 2007 - the only thematic collector to break through the ranks of traditionalists.

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ISSN 0974-7907 (Online); ISSN 0974-7893 (Print)

July 2016 | Vol. 8 | No. 7 | Pages: 8953–9052

Date of Publication: 26 July 2016 (Online & Print)

DOI: 10.11609/jott.2016.8.7.8953-9052

www.threatenedtaxa.org

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