

A Kashmir rumour sparks owl hunt in north India

A bizarre rumour in Jammu and Kashmir that an owl weighing over three kilograms can turn its owner into a millionaire has spread like wild fire in the rest of northern India.

The [Srinagar](#) office of IANS is receiving scores of telephone calls daily from northern India, with callers desperate to know the contact numbers of the mysterious man who has offered a fortune for such owls.

And at least one Hindi newspaper that carried the original story says its phone lines are literally jammed.

'Sir, I have an owl weighing 3.1 kilo. The bird is in good health and unharmed. Please tell me where is it to be delivered so that I can collect my reward,' pleaded Naresh Kumar, who said he was calling from New Delhi.

Similar calls have come to the IANS office from Ludhiana and Jalandhar in Punjab, Hissar in Haryana, [New Delhi](#) and also Jammu, the winter capital of Jammu and Kashmir.

Bhupinder Singh of Ludhiana said: 'I have an owl of the right weight.

I am feeding rats to the bird. Where can I claim my reward?'

Those making the queries about the dream merchant who floated the rumour about the million-rupee owl are not just the ordinary citizens.

Many journalists too are eager to interview either the elusive owl buyer or simply some of the locals who have been braving the winter chill in Kashmir to chase an owl in the state's northern parts.

That is where the rumour began. Just how, no one seems to know.

'It is such an interesting story. I want to interview somebody who went on the wild owl chase. We also need a photograph of the person. Can you help us?' a desperate journalist from Jammu asked.

The beauty is that almost all the callers seemed to believe that there must be some truth to the rumour.

One agitated caller from New Delhi even threatened to go to court if the identity of the one who is reporting willing to shell out huge amounts of money for a select owl was not revealed.

In the owl hunt now on in Kashmir, animal rights activists need not worry as the owls are to be caught alive and sold unharmed - as the rumour goes.

But the buyer is proving to be as elusive as the dream he has sold to the people.

Kashmiri villagers say they have heard that they would be paid a staggering Rs.3 million (about \$68,000) for such a creature.

According to the rumours, the mystery man looking for the bird wants nothing that weighs less than three kilograms.

According to one Kashmiri village, another villager had given him a mobile telephone number to establish contact with the buyer. He refused to divulge the so-called buyer's name or the contact phone number.

'I spoke to the buyer and he told me that the owl was needed for some scientific research and should not be harmed in any way. But only those birds weighing three kilos and above are in demand,' he said.

'This proves that Kashmir's grapevine has strong elements of credibility,' said Nizam-ud-Din, 87, a resident of downtown Srinagar.

'I am reminded of the days when Kashmir had little means of communication. All news got disseminated through word of mouth. In Srinagar, such wild rumours were called 'Khabar-e-Zaina Kadal'. The owl story has fondled my childhood memory,' Nizam-ud-Din added.

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