

## 'Diluted' Little Grebe near Jamnagar

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On 25 June 2017, I was on a birding trip to the outskirts of Jamnagar (22° 19' N 70° 03' E) with my friend Umesh. We found a few water birds in a small pond and decided to stop there. While photographing the birds, we saw a Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*), which was looking different due to its whitish appearance. On careful observation, we noted that it had non-pigmented white feathers on most of the body except a slight brown-blackish tinge on crown, head and mantle. Its eyes and bill appeared to be normal in color. It was seen with a few normal plumaged Little Grebes in the pond and hence we could compare it with conspecifics. Initially, we thought it could be an albino. But after referring to Van Grouw (2013), we came to know that identifying the correct mutation in the field is quite difficult and this individual was not an albino, since it appeared to have normal coloured eyes. We could not identify the correct mutation.

[As stated by the observer, the identification of the correct mutation is often quite difficult. We sent the images to André Konter, who has extensive experience of aberrant colourations in grebes (*Podicipedidae*). His detailed reply regarding this individual is given below:

*The problem is sun bleaching; with the bird in your hand, you can have a look at the colour of the feathers at the base which remain rather unaffected by the action of the sun.*

*It is clear from the start that we are in the presence of a genetic mutation; any age related or other cause is to be excluded. Albinism and leucism can also be excluded.*

*Brown and isabel dilution are unlikely to be the cause as the chestnut parts in the neck would not have been much affected. With silver dilution, the upper head and back would still be dark. We remain with pastel dilution and the two forms of ino as candidates for the cause. What I can see in the photos is that the bill and skin at the base of the bill are affected by the mutation. A still rather dark greyish colour survives in the upper head whereas in the back, some light brownish tints mix with greyish tints. The eyes appear unaffected.*

*With ino, the eyes should be affected (however, I am unable to tell the effect on yellow eyes) and the upper head should have more brownish tints. With pastel dilution, the colour of the upper head should have turned into a silvery grey (this is the case here), the eyes are generally not affected (this is also the case) and bare parts may or may not be affected (this criterion does not help). At the end, I conclude that this grebe is most probably affected by pastel dilution'.*

*Hein Van Grouw stated that 'we can assume this bird is an adult and therefore should be in breeding plumage. In normal-coloured breeding plumage, this species has a large reddish-brown patch at the front, and the pigment responsible for this colour is phaeomelanin. The rest of the plumage is eumelanin. As in the aberrant bird, all the phaeomelanin is (almost) absent and the eumelanin is strongly reduced, this aberration must be a form of dilution'.*

*Thus, this individual was identified as a bird affected with dilution. Dilution is defined as a quantitative reduction of melanins. Worldwide, there have been many reports of aberrant plumages in different subspecies of Little Grebe (Konter 2015). The subspecies of Little Grebe in India is *albescens* (Llimona et al. 2017), and there are three records of aberrant coloured Little Grebes from India, including a record from Gujarat; an albino from Madhya Pradesh (Bharos 1996), a 'white' individual near Baroda, Gujarat (Patankar 2004), and a leucistic bird from Dungarpur district, Rajasthan (Sharma et al. 2010). However, it is possible that the correct mutation in these cases was not properly identified as per the criteria given in Van Grouw (2013).*

*As awareness increases, there have many been recent reports of colour aberrant birds from Gujarat (Patel 2016, Trivedi 2016, Vaghasiya 2016, Rafique 2017) and this sighting is an addition to such observations here in the state.*

*We are very grateful to André Konter and Hein Van Grouw for all their help – Eds]*

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## European Nightjar: a passage migrant in Kachchh

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- *europaeus* – N & C Europe, east through NC Asia (mainly South of c. 60° N) to Lake Baikal region.
- *meridionalis* – NW Africa and Iberia, east through S Europe, Crimea, Caucasus and Ukraine to NW Iran and Caspian Sea.
- *sarudnyi* – Kazakhstan from Caspian Sea, east to Kyrgyzstan, Tarbagatai and Altai Mountains.
- *unwini* – Iraq and Iran, east to W Tien Shan and Kashgar region, north to S Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and south to W & N Pakistan.
- *plumipes* – E Tien Shan (NW China and W & S Mongolia).
- *dementievi* – S Transbaikalia and NE Mongolia.

The European Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*), also known as Eurasian Nightjar, is a nightjar that breeds throughout Northern and Central Europe; from South Scandinavia, western and eastern Europe, NW Africa, to Central Asia, NW China and NE Mongolia; it is highly migratory and winters in sub-Saharan Africa (Cleere & Christie 2017). Despite decreasing population trends, due to its large numbers and huge breeding range, it is classified by the IUCN as 'Least Concern' (BirdLife International 2016). The main threats to the species are habitat loss, disturbance and a reduction of its insect prey through pesticide use.

The preferred habitat of the European Nightjar is dry, open country with some trees and small bushes, such as forest clearings or woodlands. There are six recognised subspecies, although the differences are mainly clinal; birds become smaller and paler in the east of the range and the males have larger white wing spots. Birds of intermediate appearance occur where the subspecies' ranges overlap. The subspecies and their ranges, taken from Cleere & Christie (2017), are as follows:

However, there is some variation in the descriptions of the subspecies. Cleere (2010) describes the subspecies *unwini* as being greyish, while Ayé *et al.* (2012) describe this as paler, plainer and more greyish with more sparsely marked undertail-coverts.

For the Indian Subcontinent, It is said to be widely distributed and a common breeding bird and passage migrant in Pakistan, with a few birds possibly over-wintering occasionally (Cleere & Christie 2017). For India, it is an autumn passage migrant in north-western India, mainly in Kachchh, with stragglers recorded from Jodhpur (Rajasthan), Mumbai city (Maharashtra) and Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh) (Ali & Ripley 2001). Grimmett *et al.* (2011) show it as a passage migrant in Kachchh, and give isolated records from Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

For Gujarat, it has been recorded only in Kachchh as an autumn passage migrant. Lester (1904) does not mention sighting the European Nightjar in Kachchh. Ali (1945) noted the European Nightjar in Kachchh, from 17 September to