

## Sighting of aberrant coloured Little Cormorant near Junagadh

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Albinism has been recorded in many vertebrate taxa (Halls 2004). It is a genetic anomaly in which an autosomal recessive gene causes an absence of the enzyme tyrosinase, resulting in a total lack of melanin pigment in skin, scales, hair, feathers and eyes (Van Grouw 2006). The occurrence of aberrant colouration such as melanism, albinism or leucism is rare in birds (Sage 1963). A complete loss of all pigment is the most severe aberration in plumage patterns. It results in a bird with white plumage and lack of pigments in soft parts.

On 27 April 2014, during a birding trip near Auzat River (21° 24' N, 70° 30' E), Junagadh, Gujarat, I sighted a bird perched beside a Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*). It was white in colour but I was sure that it was not an egret. It had webbing on its feet and a different beak from egrets. It was identified as a Little Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax niger*), having white coloured feathers. For further observation, I went close to it and observed the red eye and pink webbed feet, and took photos. I suspected the bird to be an albino. The skin and eye colour of albinos is pink because the blood can be seen through the transparent, non pigmented tissues (Van Grouw 2006, Cook *et al.* 2012). Albinism in birds is very rarely observed, not only because albinism is rare, but also because albinos have low survival rates and do not survive beyond fledgling (Van Grouw 2006), and hence this was interesting. After 18 days of observation, I came to know that there was a colony of Little Cormorants near this individual's roosting site.

In cormorants, very few records of albinism are found in published literature. Most of earlier records were misidentified, since birders often reported leucism as 'partial albinism', or full leucism as albinism, which is incorrect (Van Grouw 2006). Albinism has been reported in Great Cormorant (*P. carbo*) (Goula & Parchas 2012), Bank Cormorant (*P. neglectus*) (Nelson 2005), Cape Cormorant (*P. capensis*) (Cook *et al.* 2012) and Guanay Cormorant (*P. bougainvillii*) (Delord *et al.* 2012), though it is possible that the mutation was not correctly identified in these cases.

[Since identification of the proper mutation in plumage aberrant birds is very difficult, we decided to send the images to Hein Van Grouw, the leading expert on plumage aberrations due to mutations in birds. His detailed reply is given below, with his permission:

*The 'white' Little Cormorant does seem to be white, but when you observe it more closely then you can see that very pale*



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*pigmentation is present, especially at the base of the feathers (e.g. in the tail). Also some (new) feathers are clearly pale coloured instead of white (e.g. in shoulder plumage) and therefore it is NOT Albino. This bird is, in my opinion, Ino. For more details about Ino, see Van Grouw (2013). Ino birds do also have reddish eyes, but they do not have the eye sight problems Albinos have and therefore Ino birds can survive in the wild and Albinos cannot. As the very pale colour of Ino plumage bleaches very quickly further in the (day) light, the plumage soon seems to be clear white, and that in combination with the reddish eyes makes the confusion with Albino understandable. However, as already stated above, Albino birds do not survive in the wild; not because they are white but because of their bad eye sight. Therefore you'll never find a (semi) adult Albino bird in the wild as they would not have survived their juvenile stage of life'.*

*We are very thankful to Hein van Grouw for his help in the identification of the correct mutation in this individual – Eds]*

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