

Sightings of colour aberrant birds in Ankleshwar area

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I had come across colour aberrant birds of four species around my village Untiyadra, in Ankleshwar taluka, Bharuch district, during 2014 and 2015. However, I had not given much attention to colour aberrant birds because of the general confusion that seems to exist in the birding world about colour mutations in wild birds; almost all whitish aberrations were called albino or partial albino, which is incorrect (Van Grouw 2006). I did not even take a photograph of a colour aberrant Red Avadavat (*Amandava amandava*) seen here due to lack of awareness about such birds. I realized the importance of recognizing the proper colour mutation in aberrant coloured wild birds after reading the two seminal papers by Hein Van Grouw (Van Grouw 2006, 2013). I report here four colour aberrant birds with the identification of the correct mutation.

Identification of the proper colour mutations in the field can be extremely difficult and is by no means always possible (Mahabal *et al.* 2016). Some mutations are hard to distinguish in the field (and in museum collections) because the colours of feathers with pigment reduction are easily bleached by sunlight and can even become almost white. For the correct identification and naming of colour mutations, it is necessary to know which changes have occurred to the original pigmentation (Van Grouw 2006). A comprehensive review of colour aberrant birds seen and recorded in India was done by Mahabal *et al.* (2016). The following four sightings of colour aberrant birds seen by me are given here:

Garganey (*Anas querquedula*): On 18 March 2018, I visited Panoli GIDC Lake (21° 32' N, 72° 58' E) for ducks (*Anas* sp). I spotted a flock of around 700 ducks comprising of three species; 70% Garganey, and the remaining 30% Northern Shovelers (*Anas clypeata*) with only four to five Common Teals (*Anas crecca*). While photographing these ducks, one colour aberrant pale brownish duck was seen, but it was quite far. I took another eight or nine photographs for identification. This bird was almost whitish-brown. It was identified as a female Garganey based on (i) as mentioned earlier, only three duck species were present (ii) The bird was smaller than the Northern Shovelers present there (iii) it was swimming and flying with the flock of Garganeys and (iv) supercilium and loreal stripe were still visible.

As per my presumption, and with the help of the identification papers (Van Grouw 2006, 2013, Mahabal *et al.* 2016), I identified the colour mutation as possibly 'Brown'. Brown mutation is widespread among all species and, after progressive graying, is most frequently encountered in birds. Brown is a sex linked colour mutation. Most wild birds with

the mutation brown are females, which was also seen here. Brown males are very rare in nature (Van Grouw 2006, 2013).

There is apparently only one published record of a colour mutated Garganey (Karuthedathu 2014) which was misidentified as 'Leucistic' by the original author and later, the mutation was correctly identified as probably 'Dilution' (Mahabal *et al.* 2016). I also searched for photos of colour aberrant Garganey on several popular websites, but could not find any other records. Hence, this is possibly the second published record of a colour aberrant Garganey from India.



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Brown Crake (*Amaurornis akool*): In August 2014, I invited my Valsad based friends, Mohammad Jat and Akshay, for bird watching. While coming here, they saw an almost white crake for a few seconds at Sisodra (21° 49' N, 72° 89' E), Ta: Ankleshwar. However, this bird was not identified or photographed on that day, but as the location was near my village, they informed me of this. Subsequently, when I visited the same location on 29 September 2014, I saw two Brown Crakes afar. One of them had an unusual colouration. Its upperparts were almost white while underparts were dark brownish. I took some record photos using a digital camera. This bird was very shy compared to its normal coloured partner. Thereafter, this colour aberrant bird was seen thrice more during my visits, but I did not give much attention to it then, misidentifying it as a partial albino (this however is wrong, as partial albinism is never possible).



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Aberrant birds....

Now, I reanalyzed the photos and tried to identify the colour mutation observed in this Brown Crake and, as per my presumption, it may possibly be 'Partial Leucism'. I also realized that there is not a single published photograph or record of a colour aberrant Brown Crake. Hence, this could possibly be the first such record from India.

Red-whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*): In 2014, I came across two colour aberrant Red-whiskered Bubluls at different locations.



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Red-whiskered Bulbul – An unusual whitish coloured Red-whiskered Bulbul was seen on 19 April 2014 at my village Untiyadra (21° 29' N, 72° 56' E), Ta – Ankleshwar. The bird immediately flew away but I was able to take one photograph for record. I believe that the mutation in this bird is 'Dilution'.

A second colour aberrant Red-whiskered Bulbul (first record) was seen by Yagnesh Bhatt at Sisodra (21° 30' N, 72° 52' E), Ta: Ankleshwar, on 29 June 2014, when we were searching for bitterns (*Ixobrychus* sp.) on canal road. The bird was seen only for a few seconds and Yagnesh Bhatt had succeeded in taking a single record shot of the bird. My assumption for the mutation in this bird is 'Progressive Graying'.

There are number of records of colour mutations in Red-whiskered Bulbul in India; five records were reviewed by Mahabal *et al.* (2016). Three were identified as birds with the mutation 'Progressive Graying' and two with the mutation 'Brown' whereas all these were misidentified as Albino or Leucistic by the original authors.

Expert opinion

As mentioned earlier, correct identification of mutation is very difficult; I sent the images of the first three birds (Garganey, Brown Crake and the first Red-whiskered Bulbul) to Hein Van Grouw, the leading expert on colour aberrations and Senior Bird Curator at the Natural History Museum, Tring, UK. His reply is given here with his due permission:

"Yes, I agree; the duck is a Garganey. You are pretty good with identification. The Garganey is indeed Brown, and I think the

Bulbul is also Brown (but it probably looks a bit more gray due to the lighting of photo and as the plumage is a bit bleached already). The Crake, one can call Partial Leucism indeed, but the white feathers are almost certainly caused by Progressive Graying. However, Progressive Graying can be considered as a special form of Leucism".

I also sent the image of the second Red-whiskered Bulbul (photo by Yagnesh Bhatt) to Hein Van Grouw along with my opinion in a subsequent email. He confirmed that the colour mutation of the bird was indeed 'Progressive Graying'.

In August 2015, as mentioned earlier, a colour aberrant Red Avadavat was also seen at my village with Yogesh C Patel. But, being unable to photograph it, I have not included it here. These records of colour aberrant birds from Ankleshwar area are important to understand the various types of colour mutations seen in wild birds. The record of the colour aberrant Brown Crake is especially interesting, because there is no published record of colour aberration in this species earlier from India and this seems to be the first such record from the country.

[In our previous issues, we have given many notes/articles on colour aberrant birds, with the correct mutation identified by experts like Hein Van Grouw. With increasing awareness, we are getting more information about such birds in Gujarat. These sightings are important as we get an idea regarding the various colour mutations in wild birds. The colour aberrant Brown Crake reported here is very interesting and as stated by the author, possibly the first such sighting of this species from the country - Eds]

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