

## Sighting of Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* with 'Progressive Greying' at Vadhwana Wetland of Vadodara

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Eurasian Coots (*Fulica atra*) are medium sized, gregarious waterbirds belonging to order Gruiformes and family Rallidae (Ali & Ripley 1983). They are resident as well as winter visitors in India and are distributed in Europe, Asia, Northern Africa and Australia. They breed over the greater part of Europe and Asia, south to North Africa. They migrate to the Indian subcontinent from Central Asia, China and South Russia during the winter. A small population, however, stays back in northern parts of India (Ali & Ripley 1983, Parasharya *et al.* 2004, Grimmett *et al.* 2014, Ganpule 2020). The species is considered as a 'Least Concern' species due to its wide distribution and increasing population (Birdlife International 2021). It inhabits fresh water bodies in large numbers. The adults have a slaty-black plumage with a stout pointed ivory-white bill and flat, rounded horny shield covering the forehead. Both male and female have the same plumage but the young are grayish brown, with paler brown mottled upperparts and white under parts (Ali & Ripley 1983).

Vadhwana Wetland, currently designated as a 'Ramsar Site', is located in Vadodara District, near Dabhoi town. We visited the wetland on 8 November 2021. A bird with abnormal coloration in a flock of a few coots with normal plumage caught the attention of the first author. It had ivory white bill

but white feathers were distributed on the forehead, head, neck and the back of the bird, interspersed with normal black feathers. Dull blackish feathers were present on the underparts. This coot was seen again on 13 November 2021 and then, during every visit in the last week of November 2021. Photographs were taken using Sony HX 400 and Nikon 500D cameras. Careful scrutiny of these photos was done – the plumage, eye and bill colour was compared with photos of normal coloured coots. Recent and past publications on colour aberrations in birds were referred to understand the type of aberration in this individual. Terminology used in Mahabal *et al.* (2016) and van Grouw (2021) was studied to understand the colour mutation. After comparison, it was inferred that the plumage was matching with the aberration or mutation known as 'Progressive Greying'. The photographs were then sent to Hein van Grouw, an expert working on colour aberrations in birds for more than 30 years, who confirmed that the mutation in this individual was indeed progressive greying. Later, one more bird of the same species and with similar colour aberration was also seen in the wetland.

This sighting of a coot with colour aberration is the first such observation at Vadhwana. However, few colour aberrant coots



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have been recorded in other parts of Gujarat in the past i.e. at Kanewal in Anand district (Parasharya *et al.* 1996) and at Jawla Wetland of Savli Tehsil of Vadodara in June 2010 (Devkar, R. & Upadhyay, K., Times of India, 14 June 2010). These individuals were referred to as 'white coot' and 'albino' respectively. There are other records of colour aberrant coots from India; an 'albino' coot has been recorded from Kota (Nair & Vyas 1996) and a coot described as a 'Leucistic' individual was recorded from a wetland located near Paravur municipality in Kollam in Thiruvanthapuram by Sadiq Chithara (The Hindu 2016).

The plumage colour in birds is due to biological pigments, structural colours (selective light reflection due to the structure of the feather) or a combination of both pigments and structural colours (Mahabal *et al.* 2016). The two main pigments responsible for plumage colour in birds are melanin (eumelanin and pheomelanin) and carotenoids. Other rare pigments are Psittacin (found only in Psittacidae) and Porphyrin (van Grouw 2013). According to Sage (1963), occurrence of plumage aberrations is rare in birds but has been recorded in various avian species in India (Dharmakumarsinhji 1975, Khachar 1983, Pandya 1994, Sani & Kasambe 2007, Shukla, 2010, Roy 2010, Mahabal *et al.* 2016, Trivedi 2016, van Grouw 2021).

Colour aberrations are due to genetic mutations which affect the presence and distribution of the pigment cells, melanin synthesis or melanin distribution. Besides this, pigment disturbance can also be caused by non-heritable, external and often temporary factors like injury, disease, food deficiency or other environmental factors (Sage 1962, van Grouw 2013, Mahabal *et al.* 2016, van Grouw 2021). The recognition and naming of colour aberrations in birds, however, still causes widespread difficulties and confusion (van Grouw 2013). Identifying colour mutations in the field can be extremely difficult and is by no means always possible (Mahabal *et al.* 2016). When past records of colour aberrations in Indian birds were reviewed by Mahabal *et al.* (2016), in many cases, a variety of names such as albinism, partial albinism and leucism were seemingly randomly used to identify and classify mutations and in a majority of the cases, the identification of the colour mutation was incorrect.

Progressive graying is a colour mutation in which both melanin pigments are lost with age, either from some parts or from all of the plumage, including the skin. Leucism is a congenital loss of melanin-producing cells from the skin, resulting in loss of melanin pigment from few parts or from all of the plumage. Both aberrations can form white plumage on few parts or on

all of the body, but they differ by birds having melanised eyes in leucism and normal eyes in progressive graying. Albino results due to heritable lack of enzyme tyrosinase in melanocytes, and hence, there is a lack of melanin pigment in feathers, eyes and skin, producing white plumage with red eyes (van Grouw 2006, 2013, Mahabal *et al.* 2016, van Grouw 2021).

This coot in Vadhwana Wetland was identified as an individual with 'Progressive Graying' and this is another record of a plumage aberrant bird from Gujarat.

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## Sighting of Large Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx sparverioides* in South Gujarat

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I was able to take a few clear photographs of the bird. Pankaj Maheria and his friend's vehicle were just behind our car and they also saw the bird.

Our first impression was that this bird was a Common Hawk Cuckoo (*Hierococcyx varius*), which is one of the common birds of this area. However, when I checked the photographs in the camera, I got suspicious of this bird's identity due to its bigger size and somewhat different plumage from a Common Hawk Cuckoo. After arriving home, I sent the photographs to Adesh Shivkar and Prasad Ganpule for identification. Both identified this bird as a Large Hawk Cuckoo (*Hierococcyx sparverioides*) based on the brownish mantle, slate-grey head and broader banding on tail. Later, Pankaj Maheria also confirmed that the bird was a Large Hawk Cuckoo.

For Gujarat, there are two confirmed records of this species from Saurashtra and one unconfirmed record from Kachchh. On 10 March 2018 and 3 January 2019, a Large Hawk Cuckoo was seen and photographed in Girnar, near Junagadh. In November 2019, a probable juvenile/immature Large Hawk Cuckoo was seen in Kachchh by S. N. Varu. The details of all these records are given in Bagda *et al.* (2020). Thus, this is the third confirmed record of the Large Hawk Cuckoo from Gujarat and is a first record from South Gujarat.

The Large Hawk Cuckoo breeds in the Himalayas and it is a winter visitor mainly to the Eastern and Western Ghats (in Kerala), with scattered records from other parts of Peninsular India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In the Western Ghats, there are two records of this species from Maharashtra; at Mumbai and from Satara District (Dhaigude *et al.* 2020). Further south, two photographic records of the Large Hawk Cuckoo from Goa are listed in eBird (eBird 2022). This record from Vansada National Park is from the northernmost part of the Western Ghats. The earlier two records from Girnar were also in the winter season and in a forest area. Hence, there is a

I visited Vansada National Park (20° 26' 24" N, 73° 16' 48" E) on 19 December 2021 with my friend Jayesh Joshi and his son Rohan. The park is adjoining the district where I live; hence, we visit the area almost every fortnight. Vansada National Park is a tropical moist deciduous forest in Navsari District and is the northernmost part of the Western Ghats.

We were birding in the Bharadi area of the park at around 13:30 hrs; suddenly, one bird landed in front of our car, took some prey and perched on a branch of a tree just 20 feet away.

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