

Few colour aberrant birds seen in Majuli Island, Assam

The Majuli Island (26.75°–27.20° N, 93.65°–94.58° E, 84 m) is formed by the river Brahmaputra, Subansiri, Lohit, and Kherkatia Suti (a small anabranch) has an area of about 352 km². Majuli is assessed as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) in 2004 and as a Biodiversity Heritage Site (BHS) in 2019 (Saikia & Choudhury 2023).

Abnormalities in plumage pattern is common in birds and caused by various factors like mutation, diet, age, disease, parasites, injury, food deficiency and other environment related factors (Guay et al. 2012; Mahabal et al. 2015; van Grouw et al. 2016). Across the globe there are several reports of colour aberrant birds, as there is a long list of fascinated people (Van Grouw et al. 2016; Zbyryt et al. 2021). The major type of colour aberrations seen in birds are: albinism (complete absence of melanin caused by absence of tyrosinase enzyme), leucism (partial or total absence of melanin caused due to absence of pigment cells), progressive greying (partial or total absence of melanin caused by loss of pigment cells with age), melanism (increased melanin production and deposition), ino (decreased qualitative production of melanin), brown (incomplete production of eumelanin), and dilution (decreased production of melanin quantity), which are caused due to abnormal

pigmentation (van Grouw 2013; van Grouw et al. 2016).

In Assam, there are a few recent reports of colour aberrant birds. Notable records include colour aberrant Cattle Egret from Guwahati (Abraham 2018); colour aberrant Coppersmith Barbet *Psilogon haemacephalus* from Lakhimari (Gayen et al. 2022); partial leucistic Eurasian Wigeon *Mareca penelope* from Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary (Choudhury 2023); leucistic Fulvous Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna bicolor* from Guwahati (Mahananda et al. 2024); brown Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* from Kamrup District (Thapa et al. 2023); colour aberrant Spotted Dove *Spilopelia chinensis* from Nagaon (Bora et al. 2024); and a melanistic Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii* from Guwahati (Choudhury 2024). In this article we report few colours aberrant birds seen in Majuli Island, Assam.

Jungle Myna *Acridotheres fuscus*

A colour aberrant Jungle Myna *Acridotheres fuscus* was seen on 10 November 2023 in the Jugunidhari area (26.925° N, 94.126° E) of Majuli at about 0550 h. The bright white head grabbed our attention as the bird was foraging near cattle along with other birds. Typically, Jungle Myna has glossy black head, neck and cheeks, with brownish-charcoal upperparts,



Leucistic Jungle Myna *Acridotheres fuscus*.
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which gets paler towards the rump with yellow iris, orange bill along with waxy orange legs (Craig 2020). The individual that we found had a white head, neck and cheeks along with white breast, belly, back and vent. The bird had regular slaty grey sides, brownish-black wings and tail, yellow-coloured eyes, orange bill and waxy orange legs (Craig 2020). So, it was identified as a 'leucistic' individual according to the classification described by Van Grouw (2013). In India, leucistic Jungle Myna was previously reported by Nandy (2019) from West Bengal.

Chestnut-tailed Starling *Sturnia malabarica*

In the Kamalabari area of Majuli Island (26.948°N, 94.157°E) a Chestnut-tailed Starling *Sturnia malabarica* is regularly seen 13 April 2020 onwards with abnormally coloured belly. The bird has patches of white in its belly which is not normally seen. Normally, Chestnut-tailed Starling has a brownish-orange belly and rump along with white and silver grey head and neck, grey upperparts and black wingtips (Craig 2023).

It is often seen with its mate in the area. According to van Grouw (2013) classification, the individual is identified to have leucism. To the best of our knowledge there is no previous report of colour aberrant Chestnut-tailed Starling.



Partial leucistic Chestnut-tailed Starling *Sturnia malabarica*. © Shyamal Saikia.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Rambolia Beel (wetland) (26.916° N, 94.263° E) of Dakhinpat Majuli is congregated by thousands of waterfowls during winters (Hazarika & Saikia 2023). Large flocks of Greylag Goose *Anser anser* are regularly seen foraging near wetland. On 17 January 2021 while surveying the wetland birds of the area an unusually coloured Graylag Goose was seen



Brown Greylag Goose *Anser anser* foraging with normal-coloured individuals. © Shyamal Saikia.

among the flock. Few photographs were taken and it was later identified as a Brown individual. The bird had overall whitish body with some light brown on the wings. Greylag Goose normally has grey coloured plumage with pink, orange or pinkish-orange bill and legs (Carboneras & Kirwan 2020). There are reports of leucistic Greylag Goose from India (van Grouw et al. 2016) but there is no report of any brown individual.

Lesser Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna javanica* Chakuli Beel (wetland) (26.935° N, 94.141° E) is another important wetland of Majuli Island,

where numerous wetland birds are regularly seen. Hundreds of Lesser Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna javanica* along with other waterfowls are seen in this wetland. On 03 December 2021 a completely white Lesser Whistling-Duck with pink legs and eyes was seen in the beel. The bird was observed with a pair of binoculars but was too far for the

camera to get a good photograph. Looking at the colouration the individual was identified as an 'albino' Lesser Whistling-Duck. Normally, Lesser Whistling-Duck has overall uniform brown plumage and wings with black bill and legs (Carboneras & Kirwan 2020a). Albino and leucistic individuals of Lesser Whistling Duck are previously reported from India (van Grouw et al. 2016; Gayen et al. 2021).

Previous reports of 'brown' Geylag Goose and 'leucistic' Chestnut-tailed Starling are scarce in the literature. There are a few reports of colour aberration in Jungle Myna and Lesser Whistling-



Albino Lesser Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna javanica*. © Shyamal Saikia.

Duck (van Grouw et al. 2016; Nandy 2019; Gayen et al. 2021). Although the abnormalities in bird plumage colouration are not rare (Guay et al. 2012; Mahabal et al. 2015; Van Grouw et al. 2016), continued documentation of these birds can help to find the underlying cause and their ecological implications.

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