

Plumage aberrations in the House Crow

Plumage aberrations have always evoked considerable interest, and much literature has been published regarding them. Plumage aberration in birds have been reviewed by van Grouw (2006), who addressed the common inherited colour aberrations involving the melanin pigments, namely, albinism, leucism, ino, brown, dilution, and melanism. Several of these have been observed in the House Crow, *Corvus splendens*, an almost ubiquitous corvid from the Indian subcontinent (Mahabal et al. 2015; Ashwin et al. 2022).



On 25 June 2024, at approximately 1545 h, the author had an incidental sighting of a House Crow in Mumbai (19.00° N, 72.84° E). The sighting occurred in an urban setting with tree cover in the form of *Ficus*, *Azadirachta*, and *Mangifera*, among others. There were other House Crows in the immediate vicinity, which were seen and heard. This individual was seen on the ground, manipulating a plastic bag containing a fried snack. Strikingly, it bore bilaterally symmetrical white bands on its primary coverts and primary feathers. No other external abnormality was evident, including in the eyes and other feathers. Presumably being unable to access the food within the bag, and perhaps disturbed by the human foot-traffic, it flew away after a few minutes.

In birds, albinism refers to a complete absence of melanins in feathers, eyes and skin, whereas leucism refers to the partial or total lack of melanins in feathers and skin (but with normal eyes). Some reports also use the term partial albinism. This, van Grouw (2006) points out, is a contradiction in terms since albinism, by definition, is a state of complete absence of pigment. Partial leucism does exist.

Plumage aberration may also be acquired by inappropriate diet, injury, stress or infection. In such cases there may be focal areas with lack of pigmentation, as in partial leucism. However, unlike in partial leucism, even the feathers are partly coloured instead of being entirely devoid of pigmentation.

The individual reported here, with normal coloured, predominantly normal plumage, normal eye colouration, and partial loss of pigment in the affected feathers is most consistent with aberrant plumage due to dietary imbalance. Juvenile corvids have been known to manifest transverse white bars in their flight feathers, a pattern known as white wing-barring. Adult individuals typically manifest less regular patterning, which van Grouw (2018) indicates is better referred to simply as a “lack of pigment”. Most observations of dietary plumage aberrations have been made almost exclusively in Hooded Crow, *Corvus cornix* and Carrion Crow, *Corvus corone*. Indeed, the prevalence of white plumage in Carrion Crows has been estimated to be 7.2%, and it is reasonable to assume a similar proportion in House Crows.

It is speculated that corvids are susceptible to plumage aberrations from dietary causes as compared to other taxonomic groups due to a greater protein requirement for the development of healthy plumage. The amino acids required for melanin pigment formation, namely tyrosine and methionine, are dependent on dietary intake. Affected juveniles have been reported to stunted growth, smaller thyroid glands and increased mortality within the first year of life (van Grouw 2018). However, surviving individuals have been observed to display normal plumage after their first moult, suggesting this condition is reversible.

The individual House Crow discussed here has most probably been consuming a nutritionally poor diet, as has been observed in corvids in

urban environments (van Grouw 2018). This is corroborated by its sighting in the middle of a major metropolitan city attempting to consume human food. With the ever-expanding state of urbanization today, it may be speculated that more individuals of various species may become accustomed to surviving on inappropriate diets. In such a case, it is likely that dietary plumage aberrations will be more commonly observed in the future. This will pose implications not just for birders, but also conservation efforts, and ought to be borne in mind.

References

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