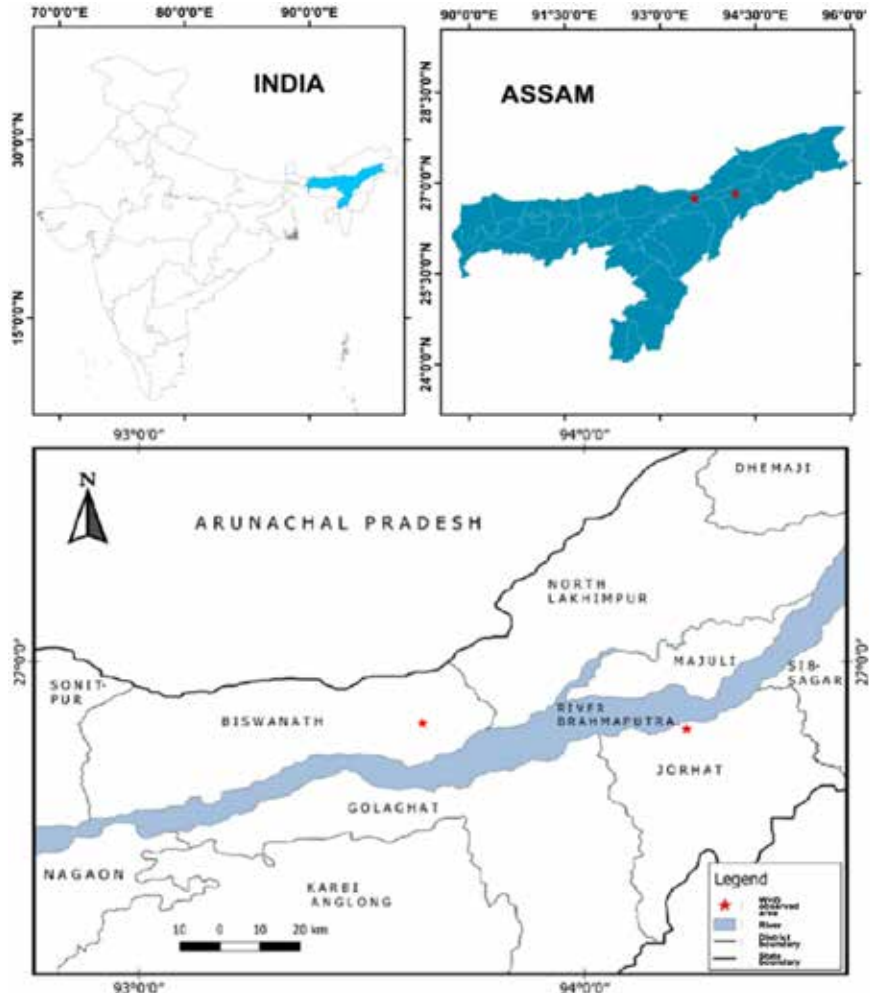


First record of a leucistic Lesser Whistling-Duck from Assam, Northeast India

The Lesser Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna javanica* is a medium-sized Anatidae species widely distributed across the Indian subcontinent, typically inhabiting freshwater wetlands such as marshes, shallow ponds, and vegetated lakes (Grimmett et al. 2011). It is currently assessed as ‘Least Concern’ on the IUCN Red List (BirdLife International 2024).

The species’ typical plumage includes a pale brown body, greyish-buff head and neck, darker brown crown and nape, chestnut-edged back feathers, warm chestnut underparts and upper tail coverts, and dark gray bill and legs (Ali & Ripley 1987; Grimmett et al. 2011).



Locations where the leucistic Lesser Whistling-Ducks were observed.



Leucistic Lesser Whistling-Duck observed among normally coloured individuals in the Chaiduar College (A) and Nimati Wetland (B), respectively. © A. Gitartha Borah B. Vishal Goswami.

On 12 November 2025, during a bird-watching programme at the Chaiduar College (Autonomus) campus, we observed an abnormally coloured duck in a wetland inside the campus (26.8788°N, 93.6047°E). The bird was seen among a large flock of approximately 238 Lesser Whistling-Ducks (LWD). We photographed the unusual individual and identified it as a LWD based on its medium size, overall shape, beak structure, flight behaviour, and characteristic call (Ali & Ripley 1987). Unlike the normal plumage of this species, the bird had a café au lait coloured crown rather than the typical dark brown, and its usual buff-grey head and neck were replaced by an off-white colouration. The mantle, wings, abdomen, and tail feathers were also pale whitish, with only a few patches showing the normal brown tones.

The eyes remained dark, consistent with typical individuals. Slightly light orange feathers were visible near the tail, and the lower mandible was distinctly calamine-pink instead of the usual blackish tone. These features clearly indicated partial leucism, a plumage condition occasionally reported in other bird species in India (Bera et al. 2021). Another leucistic LWD was recorded on 8 December 2024 at the Nimati Wetlands, Jorhat (26.8425°N, 94.2170°E), observed early in the morning within a mixed flock of LWDs and Fulvous Whistling-Ducks.

Colour aberrations in birds are deviations from normal plumage resulting from disruptions in pigment production or distribution, affecting eumelanin, pheomelanin, or both. Such aberrations are distinct from typical plumage and can be systematically classified (Cieslinska

et al. 2025). Leucism and other colour aberrations have been reported in several Indian waterfowl species, including Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* (Mahajan 2016), Garganey *Anas querquedula* (Karuthedathu et al. 2014), Knob-billed Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos* (Newnham & Aitken 1886), Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* (Karuthedathu et al. 2014), and Gadwall *Anas strepera* (Harrison & Harrison 1972). In addition, aberrations such as colour dilution resulting from reduced melanin expression rather than complete pigment loss have also been documented in Anatidae (van Grouw 2006). These conditions may increase visibility to predators and influence mate selection. In India, albinism in the LWD has been reported (Gayen et al. 2021) and a leucistic Fulvous Whistling-Duck was recorded from Deepor Beel, Assam (Mahananda et al. 2024). However, there is no published record of colour dilution or leucism in the LWD from Assam.

This study documents the first confirmed case of leucism in the LWD from Assam and northeastern India. The identification is validated through clear photographic evidence and consistent diagnostic features. This record enhances current knowledge of plumage aberrations in regional waterfowl and highlights the importance of sustained field observation and reporting.

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Citation: Borah, G., R. Kakati, R. Sarma, V. Goswami, K. Kakati & A. Hussain (2026). First record of a leucistic Lesser Whistling-Duck from Assam, Northeast India. *Bird-o-soar* #290, In: *Zoo's Print* 41(5): 16–18.