Sighting of an albino nightjar at Udawalawe National Park, Sri Lanka

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An albino nightjar was recorded on 7th August 2011 at the Udawalawe National Park. The bird was seen at 0700 hrs, in scrub jungle, adjacent to a park road (06 27.837 N, 080 52.296 E). Two species of nightjars (Order: Caprimulgiformes), the common nightjar (*Caprimulgus asiaticus*) and long-tailed nightjar (*Caprimulgus atripennis*), are found in the Udawalawe region (Henry 1998). As this sighting was of a completely white bird (Image 1A) and as it did not call, the species could not be definitively identified. The bird was observed when it was flushed out of the vegetation by our vehicle. The nightjar was sighted in scrub jungle (Image 1B), a habitat type in which these species are usually found (Henry 1998).

Image 1. (A) The albino nightjar observed at Udawalawe. Note complete albinism including lack or pigments in irides and bill. (B) The habitat in which the albino nightjar was observed. (C) The dried vegetation in which the albino nightjar landed upon being flushed by the vehicle. Note the conspicuousness of the bird among the vegetation. (Photo credits: B.V.P. Perera).

Albinism is defined as the complete lack of melanins in skin, feathers and eyes resulting from the enzyme tyrosinase which is necessary for production of melanins (van Grouw 2006). Albinism is derived from both autosomal and sex-linked recessive alleles (Hutt and Mueller 1943, Brumbaugh et al. 1983). Other forms of aberrations, such as leucism (partial lack of melanins in feathers) and dilution (quantitative reduction of melanins), could result in abnormalities such as white feathers in the plumage, or reduced colouration in affected birds (van Grouw 2006). As the nightjar sighted was totally white with lack of pigments in its irides (Image 1A), it can be classified as an albino bird.

Albinism has been recorded in nocturnal birds such as owls, frogmouths and goatsuckers (Irby 1927, Gross 1965, Alaja and Mikkola 1997) of which the latter two groups belong to the Order Caprimulgiformes. Henry (1998) reports of an albino brown wood owl in Sri Lanka, but there are no previous records of albinism in the Genus *Caprimulgus.* Therefore, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first record of an albino nightjar from Sri Lanka.

Albinism is frequently associated with disadvantages for such animals. The normal plumage of nightjars conceals them well among dried vegetation and sand where it frequently rests (Henry 1998). An albino nightjar would be highly conspicuous in such a habitat as demonstrated in Image 1B and would be clearly visible to nocturnal predators. Further, the nightjar's behaviour when it was flushed by our vehicle was typical of that of a normally pigmented bird, and it proceeded to "conceal" itself among dried vegetation (Image 1C), which made it highly visible.

Hypopigmented mammals frequently have associated abnormalities in the retina of the eye (Jeffery 1997). Most mammalian retinas are dominated by rod cells and deficits found in hypopigmented animals preferentially affect rod cells (Jeffery 1997). Hypopigmented birds with cone cell dominated retinas however, do not show retinal deficits (Jeffery and Williams 1994). Whereas diurnal birds have cone cell dominated retinas, nocturnal birds, including birds in Order Caprimulgiformes have rod cell dominated retinas (Nicol and Arnott 1974, Rojas et al. 1997, Martin et al. 2004, Rojas et al. 2004). Therefore, it is possible the albino nightjar could have retinal defects with corresponding defects in vision.

Although the area in which this bird was sighted was searched on nine separate occasions (four times at night, and five times during daytime), it was not observed again. To the best of our knowledge, there have not been any other reports of albino or leucistic nightjars in the Udawalawe region subsequent to this sighting. As albinism and other leucistic colour variations are hereditary, it is possible that other nightjars in the Udawalawe population are also affected. Although small isolated populations with inbreeding could be more susceptible to having albinistic colour aberrations (Bensch *et al.* 2000), current observations at Udawalawe do not reveal such a problem in the nightjar population. As the nightjar population size has not been estimated at Udawalawe, information on population size may be of value for conservation measures.

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Announcement: Second Indian Biodiversity Congress (IBC 2012)

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