



Leucism in Red-Vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*) in Mehsana, Gujarat

Vyom Chaudhari*

Chachariya, Kheralu, Mehsana – 384325

*Corresponding author: chaudharivyom286@gmail.com

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On the morning of July 21, 2024, at around 7 AM, I (Vyom Chaudhari) along with my two sisters, Divya and Janvi, set off to visit a temple near our village. As it was monsoon, I was looking for reptiles along the way, and my sisters helped me look out for them. We were lucky enough to encounter a large rat snake (*Ptyas mucosa*) and a juvenile monitor lizard (*Varanus bengalensis*) on our way. In addition to reptiles, we were also looking for birds.

At around 8:10 am, at coordinates 23.872°N, 72.542°E, I noticed something unusual on a big iron rod. A small bird with a brownish body and a red vent caught my attention. At first glance, it looked like a red vented bulbul, but I was unsure because its head region was white, which is not typical for that species. After confirming the sighting with my friend Vyom Vyas, I realized it was indeed a red-vented bulbul, though with an atypical coloration. I have spotted more than 15-20 birds with a similar appearance.

This phenomenon, called color aberration, has been observed in these birds before and is more specifically called Leucism. Leucism occurs when the pigment melanin, responsible for darkening feathers, is absent. This results in a bird having pale or white feathers in certain areas, giving them a striking, unusual appearance. It was fascinating to witness this color aberration in the wild.

Leucism is an inherited trait, but the extent and location of the white feathers can vary between individual birds and their offspring. This trait can also skip generations if the leucistic genes are recessive, which means the offspring must inherit the gene from both mother and father to express leucism. The lack of pigment in leucistic birds weakens their feathers, making them

more susceptible to wear and damage. In some cases, this can even impair their ability to fly, which, combined with their more conspicuous appearance, increases their vulnerability to predators. Additionally, there is evidence suggesting that leucistic birds may sometimes be overlooked or even rejected by potential mates (British trust for ornithology (BTO), leucism and albino. <https://www.bto.org/ourscience/projects/gbw/gardenswildlife/gardenbirds/behaviour/plumage/leucism> (Accessed on 27 July 2024).

This phenomenon underscores the many untold stories that lie hidden in nature's unexplored corners, waiting to be discovered and examined to uncover the reasons behind it.



References:

- British trust for ornithology (BTO), leucism and albino. <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbw/gardens-wildlife/garden-birds/behaviour/plumage/leucism> (Accessed on 27 July 2024)
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