

few small or pruned trees that were around in the agriculture fields were not suitable for nesting and the pair found the power transformer more suitable to provide protection to the nest.

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An accidental death of a Critically Endangered White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*

On 21 November 2022, during a field visit to Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, India, we witnessed an unusual death of a White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*. Based on information from a local shepherd, we visited an area near Veer Singh Ki Dhani of Myajlar village, where a vulture was found dead under a camel carcass (26.27°N, 70.37°E). The camel carcass was originally lying on its right side. We failed to extract the vulture carcass from under the camel. When we lifted the camel carcass, we discovered that the head of the vulture was wedged between the ribs of the camel [183]. The vulture was identified as a juvenile White-rumped Vulture [184], which is listed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN (BirdLife International 2023).



183. A White-rumped Vulture with its neck stuck between the ribs of the camel carcass. Note that the vulture is lying on its back in this image.



Both: Ramesh Choudhary

184. The vulture carcass after it was extracted from the camel carcass.

Observing the posture of the camel carcass in relation to the vulture, we inferred that the vulture was trying to feed in between ribs and somehow its head was fatally stuck between the camel's ribs resulting in its death. Vultures have a long and supple neck, and while such unusual mortalities of vultures do happen, they are not common. It may also be possible that the vulture got accidentally stuck during the feeding frenzy when a large number of vultures were feeding on the camel carcass. The camel carcass may have then toppled over by the activity of other scavengers. This type of mortality in vultures has been reported previously by others (Allen 1920; Greenwood 1938; Samson & Ramakrishnan 2017).

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Colour aberration in the Great Slaty Woodpecker *Mulleripicus pulverulentus* from Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve, Uttarakhand

We report multiple sightings of colour aberrant individuals in a Great Slaty Woodpecker *Mulleripicus pulverulentus* (GSW) flock at Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve (PCR, 29.33°–29.40°N, 79.13°–79.27°E) in Ramnagar, Uttarakhand, India.

GSW is a cooperative breeder (Lammertink 2004) and occurs in small flocks, with a pair and helpers. The species is sexually dimorphic, with males bearing a red moustachial stripe. Both sexes have a yellow chin, throat, and fore neck [185, 186]. The juveniles are similar to the female with yellowish throat, dull slate plumage, and more profusely spotted underparts (Ali & Ripley 1987). We identified 14 family groups represented by 63 individuals during the entire study period. However, we noticed this particular colour aberration only in two individuals belonging to a particular family group. On 31 March 2019, we came across this family group of four GSW of which two individuals showed a throat-colour that was different than usual. The flock had a male that had an entirely black throat and another male which had a regular, pale, yellowish throat [187, 188, 189]. Interestingly, the same flock had two females, one with a normal throat colour while another had a diffused black throat [190]. All four individuals were recorded foraging for c.45 min, probing and gleaning the termites from the fissures in the bark of *Shorea robusta* (Sal) as well as feeding on the seeds of *Mallotus philippensis* [189]; a hitherto undocumented feed of GSW (Ali & Ripley 1987). After foraging, the pair that had darker throats separated themselves from the other individuals and was involved in a display on the trunk of a *Lannea coromandelica* tree. The male called while tilting the head back, opening the wings wide open, and pecking hard on the tree bark, chipping wood off the surface. They were observed pecking each other on the wings and legs. This lasted for c.20 min, followed by copulation. We saw this same family flock on the next day as well as on 06 May. On 15 June, we recorded the same group constructing a nest cavity on the main trunk of Sal with a 145 cm girth. Each individual participated in the construction of the nest cavity but the nest cavity was abandoned on 02 July due to unknown reasons.

During the next season, we saw presumably the same family flock (identified by the aberrant individuals) on 01 April 2020 foraging together at the same site. On 17 May, we saw them again and on the next day they were seen exploring the previous year's nest cavity. On subsequent days, we had multiple sightings of this group foraging or preening on a Sal, and once, on 25 May, the normal coloured individuals were seen copulating.

The multiple sightings of the same individuals during the two consecutive post-breeding and breeding seasons (2019 and 2020) confirm that the individuals were neither moulting nor young. To verify if there is any prior documentation of such a colour patch on its throat, we requested for photographs of type specimens of both subspecies (*M. p. harterti* and *M. p. pulverulentus*) at the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), Smithsonian Institution Washington D.C., and Natural History Museum (NHM), London. We also transmitted our photographs to the said museums to compare against the existing set of skins. However, none of museum skins had such a throat patch. Additionally, we reviewed all the available photographic records submitted to eBird (www.ebird.org) across the species range and found no similar plumaged individuals.

There are no known incidences of colour aberration in the genera *Mulleripicus* (Family: Picidae) represented by four species occurring in South and Southeast Asia. van Grouw (2013) identifies albinism, leucism, brown, dilution, ino, and melanism as the different type of colour aberrations. Ours would qualify as a case of abnormal deposit of melanin pigment on the yellow throat but not melanism entirely (Hein van Grouw in email dated 07 August 2023).



185, 186. Male (Top) and Female (Bottom) Great Slaty Woodpeckers showing normal pale coloration of the throat from a different family group in the study area.



187, 188. Two male Great Slaty Woodpeckers of the same family group at the same foraging substrate showing typical coloration to the throat (Top) and diffused black coloration to the otherwise pale throat (Bottom) during the breeding season of 2020 in May.



Both: Sarabjeet Kaur

189, 190. A male Great Slaty Woodpecker feeding on the seeds of *Mallotus philipensis* (Top) and a female showing a throat with diffused black coloration (Bottom) from the same family group observed prior to the 2019 breeding season in March.

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A Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* from Buhchangphai, Mizoram

On 15 June 2022, we visited Buhchangphai (24.33°, 92.67°E; 42 m asl) which is 22 km north from Kolasib town, in northern Mizoram, India. The area is rich in bird life, since there are paddy

fields and fishponds, as well as some forested areas. After observing and photographing birds such as Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus*, Bronze-winged Jacana *Metopidius indicus*, Bengal Bushlark *Mirafra assamica*, and Cinnamon Bittern *Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*, we also see three Oriental Pratincoles *Glareola maldivarum* flying high and crossing our path. Soon after, we were surprised to see a lone, unfamiliar light-grey bird with red bill and legs and black crown, that approached us and alighted on power cables besides a few Blue-tailed Bee-eaters *Merops philippinus*, before flying off again in a few minutes. We searched the nearby area to get another look at it, but only saw Watercock *Gallicrex cinerea*, some kingfishers *Alcedinidae* sp., and Scaly-breasted Munia *Lonchura punctulata*. Meanwhile, we consulted the Merlin app on our mobile phones, and arrived at a preliminary identification of the bird as a Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida*.

The bird was photographed from a distance of c.150 m. It was light grey with black crown and white cheeks and sides of the neck, which give its “whiskered” appearance. The wings extend beyond the tail during rest [191]. The long wings, grey rump, and weakly forked tail are clearly visible in flight [192]. Moreover, the red bill and legs, typically seen in their breeding plumage, were also observed. Identification was confirmed after consulting descriptions and illustrations in Ali & Ripley (1983) and Grimmett *et al.* (2013) as no other tern species of this size has a combination of black cap, grey rump, shallow tail, and red bill.

The Whiskered Tern has a wide range, spreading over Africa, Asia, Europe, and Australia, and is a winter visitor or passage migrant in most of parts of the Indian Subcontinent (Ali & Ripley 1983; Grimmett *et al.* 2013; Gochfeld *et al.* 2020). It is reported to breed in North Cachar in Assam, Kashmir, Delhi,



Thanihana Haubnar

191. Whiskered Tern showing conspicuous white cheeks, red bill, red legs, and neck contrast with the black crown and light grey body.