

Plumage variations in Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*



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Fig. 5

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Introduction

Plumage illustrations and descriptions of Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* in publications concerning the Indian Subcontinent (Ali & Ripley 1983; Kazmierczak 2000; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; Sonobe & Usui 1993) are restricted to the typical plumages of adult (breeding and non-breeding), juvenile, and female birds. Unfortunately, there are no illustrations or descriptions of the large number of plumage variations found in Black-winged Stilts with regard to changes brought about by age or season. Hence, stilts with variable amount of black on crown and upper neck, which are seen in winter, do not look like any of the birds illustrated / described in the books. As a result, many birdwatchers suspect such birds to be Australian subspecies *H. h. leucocephalus*. This note describes plumage variations seen in the field, and compares plumage patterns of Indian variations with conspecifics of Black-winged Stilt, i.e., *H. h. leucocephalus*, and *H. h. mexicanus*.

Observations Unusual plumage

On 13 January 2010 we spotted a Black-winged Stilt that had quite a different plumage from its conspecifics, foraging in a small, waterlogged area near Dwarka (22°19'57"N 69°05'39"E), Gujarat. The bird had dark black wings and white under parts. Unlike the other birds it had a black nape, upper neck and crown, black lores and ear-coverts. Some white feathers were visible on the black nape. Its forehead, chin, throat, and breast were white. The other stilts nearby had pure white head and neck region with grey plumage on back (Figs. 1 & 2).

On 8 December 2009, we photographed another Black-winged Stilt at Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary (22°49'25"N 72°02'02"E) with similar plumage pattern as described above. However, this bird had a small

white spot above its eye, and typical maroon / red edge to its wings (Fig 3); a diagnostic feature of *H. h. mexicanus* (Hayman *et al.* 1986).



Figs. 1 & 2

Photos: Bhavik Patel



Fig. 3



PHOTOS: B. M. Parasharya

Fig. 4

In a third situation, adult birds had pure white heads with black on their napes and upper necks only (Fig. 4). In all the three birds described above, the mantle was always grey.

Normal plumage:

Normally, juveniles have dark crowns and ear-coverts, and light-grey plumage on the dorsal side of their necks and mantles. Such birds are always numerous during December–January. Variations in juvenile plumage during winter show black on crown and around eyes with varying amount of light grey on nape (Fig. 5).

Discussion

According to Hayman *et al.* (1986), in the plumage of nominate race *H. h. himantopus*, the crown and hind neck patterns vary from pure white to dusky grey in both sexes but the black patterning found in other races is absent. During non-breeding season, in some individuals of the nominate race, greyish plumage becomes more extensive on the crown, nape and hind-nape.

According to Rasmussen & Anderson (2005), non-breeding male of *H. h. himantopus* has dark (often black) cap and side of head, and grey hind-neck that contrasts weakly with black mantle (tipped dark brown when fresh). Whereas the *H. h. leucocephalus* has black wings with white head and sharply marked black hind-neck; its upper mantle is white. *H. h. leucocephalus* is well documented from Sri Lanka.

The black plumage on crown and nape in two birds was quite different from the pattern seen in the juveniles. In juvenile plumage, these parts are light grey and not black. The prominent black colour seen in the photographs indicate that the birds were not juveniles.

The other two subspecies, *H. h. mexicanus* and *H. h. leucocephalus*, shown in the book, with illustrations, partly match with birds in question but not exactly. *H. h. mexicanus* has similar black pattern on head and neck but has black mantle which continues with black of upper neck. However in the birds observed here, black colour of mantle and neck was not continuous. The upper part of the base of the neck was prominent white. The *H. h. leucocephalus* found in Australia has white mantle as well as forehead and crown; having black only on the nape and dorsal side of the neck. In both the birds observed here, the crown and ear-coverts are also black and hence differs from *H. h. leucocephalus* too. The stilt in photograph 3 almost gives an impression of *H. h. leucocephalus* however careful observation of the photograph reveals remnants of grey feathers on the mid crown as well as base of ear-coverts which is a character of *H. h. himantopus*.

We also looked at photographs of the species on Oriental Bird Club websites and found a few images matching our photographs. In two photographs by Yashodhan Bhatia, taken at Jamnagar, Gujarat, the head, nape, upper neck and back are jet black, whereas in photographs by Nikhil Devasar (place not specified), besides black on crown, nape and upper neck, grey feathers are visible on the periphery of black plumage of head and nape.

Hence, it can be concluded that all plumage variation of Black-winged Stilt described / illustrated here were of the nominate sub-species *H. h. himantopus*.

We have been observing such stilts with variable amount of black on head and neck every winter since 2005. The birds with black crown are not seen during summer (April–June) or monsoon (July–September). Hence, we believe that such stilts, seen during winter, may be migratory. It is also possible that black on the head and neck may disappear during breeding season (summer). These observations suggest that a comprehensive study of such common species, their plumage variations, and migratory patterns be studied.

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