An aberrant Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* from the Asan Conservation Reserve, Uttarakhand

The plumage colour of birds is due to the deposition of melanins in their feathers which lead to black and brown colours. Eumelanin (black) and phaeomelanin (brown) are the two types of melanins generally found in birds (Mcgraw 2006). The incidences of plumage aberration are quite common in birds (Hosner & Lebbin 2006). Van Grouw (2006) and Mahabal et al. (2016) had classified the aberrations/mutations into major types like albino, leucistic, dilution, brown, etc.

While birdwatching On 29 January 2022, at 1535 h in the Asan Conservation Reserve (30.43°N, 77.66°E) we observed a duck with pale colouration of plumage amongst Red-crested Pochards *Netta rufina*, Common Pochards *Aythya ferina*, Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata*, Ruddy Shelducks *Tadorna ferruginea*, Northern Pintails *Anas acuta*, and Eurasian Wigeons *Mareca penelope*. After a closer look at it, we concluded that the bird was a Red-crested Pochard with aberrant colouration [116].

The normal adult male Red-crested Pochard has a round orange head, red bill, black breast, white flanks, and a black tail (Grimmett et al. 1998). The females are pale brown with a darker back and a whitish face.

Compared to the normal male, in the aberrant coloured male we observed that black portions of the individual were diluted to brownish. The back was cream coloured instead of brown, while the head was pale brown instead of bright orange. So, from our observation, following van Grouw (2006), we can conclude that the individual as a brown form of aberration. This brown colouration was due to qualitative reduction of the eumelanin pigment. Plumage with incompletely oxidised eumelanin is very responsive to sunlight and easily fades to a dirty white or white (Mahabal et al. 2016).

Mahabal et al. (2016) reviewed 180 incidences of colour aberrations in 72 different Indian bird species from a period of over 129 years, but they do not list a 'brown' Red-crested Pochard from India; this could be the first report of such a bird.

Llobet & Lozano (2015), and Rihane (2017) reported aberrant (dilute) individuals of Red-crested Pochard from Morocco. Compared to the individual we observed, it had a greater degree of albinism. As the back was also reported to be 'silvery grey' instead of black, it's clearly an evidence of 'dilute' individual Van Grouw (2006). Behaviourally, the 'Morocco' bird rarely mixed with other normal Red-crested Pochards, while the individual we observed was swimming with other normal individuals of the species.



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116. Aberrant plumaged male Red-crested Pochard.

Aberrant coloured individuals are more susceptible to predation, and have lower survival rate (Owen & Shimmings 1992).

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