

alongside numerous other waders [190]. Some of us (AD, SG, and PP) got clear photographs of the bird, which we initially mistook for a Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*. Later that day, we submitted the record on eBird (Talukder et al. 2025) and shared the photos across several bird identification forums, where an expert suggested that it might be a Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* and further discussions confirmed the identification. We observed the same bird again around 1300 h at the same location, where it continued to be seen until 14 September 2025.



Fig 1. Exact location of the bird with surrounding habitat (Google Earth)



Agniva Dasgupta

190. Pectoral Sandpiper, Kargil Beach, West Bengal.

Although similar to the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *C. acuminata*, this species can be identified by the sharply defined boundary between its brown-streaked breast and white belly, its less rufous crown, and the absence of the bright buff-breast often shown by Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Its flanks and vent are also less heavily marked (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In flight, it shows narrow white bars on the upper wings and distinct white sides to the lower rump and upper tail-coverts (Grimmett et al. 2011).

The Pectoral Sandpiper breeds in Arctic tundra from the Taimyr Peninsula in Siberia east to Hudson Bay in Canada, and winters mainly in South America, with smaller numbers in Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand (Farmer et al. 2020). Its route into the Indian Subcontinent remains unclear. One possibility is that this individual deviated, for unknown reasons, from its usual migratory path towards Australia and Southeast Asia along the East Asian–Australasian Flyway (Rajeevan et al. 2014). Although the species is the most frequent transatlantic vagrant in Europe (Harrop 1993; Undeland & Sangha 2002), it remains an extremely rare vagrant in the Indian Subcontinent. This record is the ninth sighting of the species in India and the

first from the eastern coast, specifically West Bengal. Earlier records are from Punjab (Undeland & Sangha 2002), Kerala (Rajeevan et al. 2014; Reghuvaran 2017; Sreedevi 2018), Andaman Islands (Boesman 2017), Gujarat (Patel 2022), Tamil Nadu (Gajamohanraj & Sarang 2021), and Goa (Fonseca et al. 2024). These records have already been compiled in tabular form by Fonseca et al. (2024).

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Melanism in the Indian Eagle Owl *Bubo bengalensis*

Melanism, derived from the Greek *melanos* (dark-coloured), is generally defined as a condition characterized by abnormal deposits of melanin in skin and feathers, resulting in a blackish appearance. Melanism does not always involve an increase in pigment quantity; rather, it may result from altered distribution of melanin within feathers. In birds, two forms of melanin are responsible for plumage coloration: eumelanin, which produces black, grey, and dark brown colors, and pheomelanin, which produces reddish-brown to pale buff colors (van Grouw 2021). Although a relatively rare form of colour aberration, melanism has been documented across many bird families, including several

owls such as the Eurasian Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* (van Grouw 2017), Greyish Eagle Owl *B. cinerascens* (Kruskopf et al. 2024), Tawny Owl *Strix aluco* (van Grouw 2017), and the Ural Owl *S. uralensis* (van Grouw 2017). It can manifest as uniformly dark plumage, enlargement of dark markings, or altered pigment distribution resulting in atypical patterns.

The Indian Eagle Owl *B. bengalensis* is a widespread nocturnal raptor of the Indian Subcontinent, typically characterized by sandy brown to rufous plumage with bold black streaking, a pale facial disc and prominent ear tufts. While shade variations occur naturally within the species, there have been no documented sightings of dark morphs or melanistic individuals. Here, we report what appears to be the first photographic documentation of melanism in this species.

On 08 December 2020, at 1812 h, during a vehicle-based search for owls and mammals near Kendur, Shirur Taluka, Pune District, Maharashtra, we observed an unusually dark Indian Eagle Owl perched on a small rock among dry grass (18.794°N, 74.001°E). The bird was seen side-on as well as dorsal profile for c.20 s before flying into a nearby valley, where it could not be relocated. Photographs [191, 192] were obtained from a distance of 20–30 m under torchlight illumination.



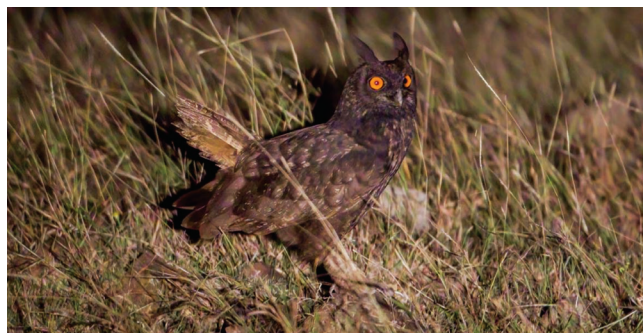
191. The first melanistic Indian Eagle Owl seen in December 2020 showing near black upper plumage.



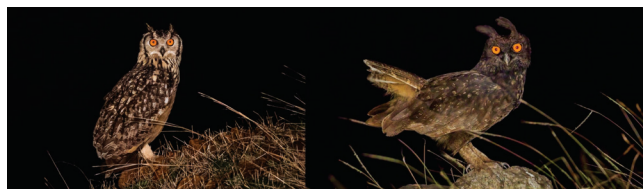
192. The first melanistic Indian Eagle Owl in flight show white dark coverts, pale secondaries and pale bands across flight feathers.

A similar individual, maybe the same bird, was again observed at nearly the same location on 27 November 2022, at 1829 h. On this occasion, the owl was perched on a medium-sized rock

covered with lichen, allowing for clearer photographs [193]. As in the earlier sighting, the bird eventually flew into the adjacent valley and was lost from view.



193. The second report of the melanistic Indian Eagle Owl, possibly the same bird, photographed in November 2022 showing dark phase and underparts.



194. A typical Indian Eagle Owl (left) and the melanistic individual (right).

In both observations, the individual exhibited uniformly dark brown to near-black plumage, atypical for Indian Eagle Owl. The facial disc showed only faint contrast, being slightly more obvious in the first sighting. The underparts lacked the characteristic buff ground color but light streaking was visible even though diffused and dark. The dorsal and wing coverts were largely uniform, with mottling greatly reduced; only a few pale brown spots were visible. In flight, the underwing revealed contrasting pale grey and whitish remiges on the primaries and secondaries, consistent with typical structural patterning. The bird displayed prominent ear tufts and overall proportions diagnostic of the species. However, the substantial suppression of normal patterning and streaking, combined with the uniformly darkened plumage throughout the body, head, and wing coverts, indicated a melanistic condition characterized by altered melanin distribution rather than simply darker individual variation.

This case likely represents the first documentation of melanism in Indian Eagle Owl and this species is not known to have dark morphs. Uniformly darkened appearance with reduced patterning but retention of structural features suggests that this case may represent the 'first type' of melanism described by van Grouw (2017). In that type, all of the plumage is darker and appears blackish or dark brown, likely due to increased or more evenly distributed eumelanin deposition. Alternative explanations—soot staining, feather wear, shadow are highly unlikely, given repeated sightings in different lighting and multiple images with different time stamps.

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