

A record of partial leucism in the Moorland Chat *Cercomela sordida* at Bale Mountains National Park, southeastern Ethiopia

The Moorland Chat *Cercomela sordida* is a common Afrotropical resident in alpine moorlands of Ethiopia and Eritrea from 1820 to 3340 m, extending to adjacent cultivated areas and stony scrublands (Ash & Atkins 2009, Redman *et al.* 2009). In the Bale Mountains, however, we have also recorded it numerous times up to 4377 m at Tullu Dimtu, the highest peak. The species is a small, short-tailed, dark brown chat with wheatear-like tail pattern: white bases to the outer rectrices and dark central rectrices and tail tip, forming an inverted 'T'. It is paler grey-brown below; bill black; eyes dark brown; legs and feet black (Redman *et al.* 2009). There has also been an observation of a partially leucistic Moorland Chat, all grey with white remiges and tertials and a partly white head, near Debre Birhan, Ethiopia (Ash & Atkins 2009). Here, we present another record of partial leucism in the Moorland Chat.

In the early morning of 28 March 2022, AS observed three unusual birds in a mixed flock near Fincha'a Habera (7°01'24" N, 39°43'15" E; 3520 m asl.) in the Bale Mountains National Park, Ethiopia which were identified as partially leucistic Moorland Chats (Fig. 1). There were two other normal Moorland Chats present in the group and a Thekla's Lark *Galerida theklae*. The habitat where they were observed was a rocky grassland and moorland where *Kniphofia foliosa* and *Artemisia afra* are dominant.

The three birds with abnormal plumage were the same size as the normal adult chats, although sex could not be determined as both sexes are alike and larger than the immature bird, which we were well familiar with from our work in the park. The birds appeared as typical Moorland Chats except for having white-coloured feathers on the face (ear coverts, supercilium, chin and throat), a white ring around neck that extended to the nape, and white spots on wing feathers. The bill and tarsi are normally black, but were light yellow in these birds (Fig. 1), consistent with previous reports indicating that partially leucistic birds may, or may not, have normally coloured bill and legs (van Grouw 2013).

Notable behaviours observed included frequent flicking of the tail and wings, and dropping from shrubs onto insects on ground; both of these are typical behaviour of Moorland Chats. Although the three aberrant birds were mobile with respect to the other birds present, no antagonistic interactions were observed between the partially leucistic birds or with the normally patterned individuals.

Plumage abnormality in birds is rare in nature, but is still insufficiently studied globally (Guay *et al.* 2012). In places such as the Afrotropical region, where only sporadic documentations are available and observations of such cases are often not published, reporting such observations helps in ascertaining the prevalence of the condition and to study its causes and consequences. Our present report represents only the second record of partial leucism in the Moorland Chat.



Figure 1. Partial leucistic Moorland Chat *Cercomela sordida* photographed at the Bale Mountains National Park, southeast Ethiopia, on 28 March 2022, showing sides of the head (left and center) and nape (right) (photos: A. Sultan).

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