

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Albino Roundup

Although nearly every experienced bird watcher has seen at least one albinistic bird, the sight of one in abnormally white plumage is always startling. Because of their striking appearance, a large number of albinistic birds are contributed to the scientific collections of museums. C. Chandler Ross (*Cassina* 47:2-21) surveyed museum collections, including those of The Charleston Museum, and a good portion of the periodical literature to determine the extent of albinism in North American bird species.

Ross found no evidence of albinism in 22 avian families, most of these represented by only one species nesting in the region covered by the study. He found more albinism among waterfowl, game birds, blackbirds, and finches than in any other large families. Species having a large proportion of black in their plumage are most likely to exhibit albinism, and the American Robin far exceeds any other North American species in the number of albinos recorded. Ross considers albinism to be extremely rare among owls, hummingbirds, wrens, and titmice.

A letter from Helmut C. Mueller dated 26 October 1982 describes a Ruby-throated Hummingbird, or possibly two different individuals, seen at his feeder in Chapel Hill, N.C., during the summers of 1981 and 1982 for only a few days at a time. The entire head, including nape, was white; otherwise the bird was a normal "female." Ross found one specimen that was almost completely white and two published records of partial albinos.

Ces Loveless of Tryon, N.C., photographed an aberrant Purple Finch that appeared at a feeder at his former home in Huntington, Long Island, New York, during the winter of 1973. This bird was white where an adult male usually is purple, but the brown portions of the plumage appeared to be normal. Ross found a pure white specimen and a partial albino recorded by Ruthven Deane, who wrote three papers (1876, 1879, 1880) on albinism for the *Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club*.

Twice in the past 19 winters Gladys Baker and I have shared a white-headed White-throated Sparrow that moved back and forth between our feeders. The birds appeared normal except for large white patches on the crown, nape, and cheek. Ross reports five specimens and six other records of partial albinos.

David Chamberlain of Mount Pleasant, S.C., photographed a partially albinistic Song Sparrow at the Stono Marina, John's Island, S.C., in March 1984. First noticed by Eddie Odum, the bird was very active and generally found in the company of other Song

Sparrows in normal plumage. Ross found nine specimens, all partial albinos. Additionally, there were two sight records of birds having only one or two normal feathers.

About 20 years ago, a flock of House Sparrows that frequented the parking lot of a drive-in restaurant in Raleigh, N.C., exhibited a great deal of albinism. Almost all of the birds were abnormally pale in small patches, and at least one was dingy gray nearly all over. I suspect that some of these birds would have been strikingly white if not discolored by city grime. Zebulon used to have a very white House Sparrow, apparently a total albino, that occasionally startled me by flying across the street in front of my car. Ross found nine specimens and 46 published records representing 10 total albinos and 45 partial albinos.

Four degrees of albinism are generally recognized by ornithologists. A *total albino* has pigment completely absent from plumage, irides, and skin. An *incomplete albino* has pigment completely absent from the plumage, or irides, or skin, but not from all three. An *imperfect albino* has pigment reduced (diluted) in any or all three areas, but never completely absent. A *partial albino* has pigment completely or partially absent from parts of any or all three areas. Partial albinism is by far the commonest form. Albinism may be inherited, or it may develop in an individual bird as a result of a physiological disturbance.

Documenting plumage abnormalities in wild birds is one way amateurs can contribute to ornithology. Among the Carolina birds not on Ross's list of 232 North American species showing albinism are Brown Pelican, Anhinga, American Oystercatcher, Black Skimmer, Chuck-will's-widow, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Carolina Chickadee, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Brown Creeper, Red-eyed Vireo, Black-and-white Warbler, Pine Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Orchard Oriole, and Blue Grosbeak. If you see an albinistic bird, be sure to note the eye, bill, and leg color as well as the feather characteristics.—ELOISE F. POTTER, North Carolina State Museum of Natural History, P.O. Box 27647, Raleigh, N.C. 27611.

A partial albino Song Sparrow was at the Stono Marina, John's Island, S.C., in March 1984. (Photo by David Chamberlain)

