

# A melanistic Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) in Colorado

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## Abstract

This paper documents the presence of a melanistic male Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) of the *cafer* subspecies group (Red-shafted Flicker) at Fort Collins, Colorado on 21-22 April 2006, possibly the first instance of this plumage aberration in this subspecies group.

## Field encounter

The authors watched a melanistic male Northern (Red-shafted) Flicker (*Colaptes auratus cafer*) in Fort Collins, Colorado, on 21 April 2006 from 1700-1900 MST. Blume photographed the bird with a Canon EOS 10D camera and an image-stabilized, 70–200mm, f/2.8 Canon lens (Figures 1, 2). The bird spent this entire time within an area of about 10x10 m, resting, sleeping, drinking, and feeding on sunflower seeds and suet. It appeared to be tired and permitted the authors to approach to within 5 m. The bird reappeared the next morning around 0600 and was then seen several times over a period of 20 minutes. It drank and fed much more actively at this time. It has not been seen in this location subsequently.

From distances of 5-10 m, this flicker appeared to be almost as dark as a Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*). The red malar patches and reddish shafts of the remiges and rectrices were apparent only when observers used a binocular (Bushnell 7x35) or telephoto camera lens. The rump was dark; the



Figure 1. Ventral view of melanistic male Red-shafted Flicker, late afternoon 21 April 2006. Photograph by W. Jeffrey Blume.

bill and feet were dark gray; the underwing coverts were tinged with salmon-pink. The ventral spotting and dorsal barring of a typical Red-shafted were both discernible only with close views. The crown, auriculars, and crescent on the breast were all about equally dark.

## Discussion

After consulting the literature, we concluded that this flicker's dark plumage indicated a case of extreme melanism. Moore (1995)

does not mention melanistic aberrations in his description of the plumage of Northern Flicker, but there have been several reports of melanistic Northern (Yellow-shafted) Flickers (that is, nominate subspecies or *luteus*): Gross (1965) cited two nineteenth-century records, and G. Hanisek (1997 and pers. comm.) reported a melanistic Northern Flicker in Connecticut, presumably of subspecies *luteus*. Thus the Fort Collins bird may represent the first documented case of a melanistic Red-shafted Flicker; the subspecies found locally is *collaris*. This bird had not been noticed in the neighborhood previously, nor has it been reported since the initial observations of 21-22 April 2006. It was probably a transient and apparently stayed in the vicinity only about 13 hours.

## Literature cited

- Gross, A. O. 1965. Melanism in North American birds. *Bird-Banding* 36: 240-242.  
Hanisek, G. 1997. On melanism. Email communication posted to The Frontiers of Field Identification listserv, 15 January 1997.  
Moore, W. S. 1995. Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*). *The Birds of North America*, No. 166 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



Figure 2. Dorsal view of melanistic male Red-shafted Flicker, late afternoon 21 April 2006. Photograph by W. Jeffrey Blume.