PARTIAL ALBINISM IN A MELANISTIC MEW GULL

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On 18 February 1979, at Moss Landing, Monterey Co., California, I observed for 5 minutes and photographed (Figure 1) a predominately melanistic gull that had pure white feathering scattered over the body and wings. I identified the bird as a sub-adult Mew Gull (*Larus canus*) on the basis of size, head and bill shape, and voice. Compared to nearby California Gulls (*L. californicus*), it was distinctly smaller and had a more rounded forehead and smaller bill. The high pitched call characteristic of this species was heard two or three times. The leg color was pink, which is typical of Mew Gulls in their first year. I did not note the bill color.

The predominate color of the body and wings was a deep chocolate brown close to the "blackish brown" of Villalobos (1962) and only slightly darker than the color of a first-year Heermann's Gull (*L. heermanni*). This color appeared to be evenly distributed over the wings and body, with no evidence of counter-shading. The white feathering was confined to the crown, nape, sides of the head, scapulars, right flank, the outer five or six primaries of the left wing, and the upper primary coverts of the right wing.

Gross (1965b) reported only two cases of melanism in North American gulls, one each in the Herring Gull (*L. argentatus*) and the Laughing Gull (*L. atricilla*). Of 1847 cases of partial or complete albinism in North America, Gross (1965a) reported 33

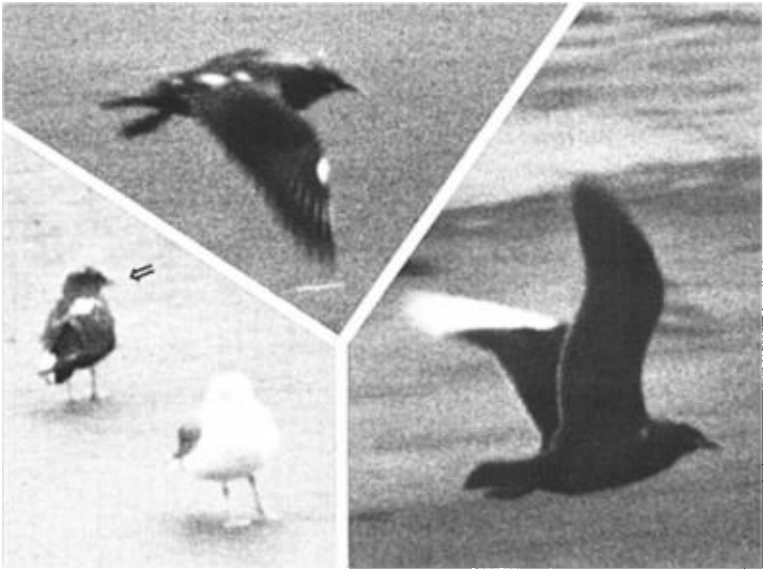

Figure 1. A melanistic Mew Gull (*Larus canus*) with partial albino feathering at Moss Landing, Monterey Co., California on 18 February 1979.

Photos by Jon Winter

(1.8%) in the Laridae, involving 10 species. He did not list the cases by species. Sage (1962) reported albinism in *L. c. canus* and seven other gulls found in the British Isles and melanism in the Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*), Herring Gull and Common Black-headed Gull (*L. ridibundus*).

The occurrence of albinism and melanism in a single individual appears to be an exceptionally rare phenomenon. I was able to find only one case in a gull. Harrison and Harrison (1962) reported a Black-headed Gull from the British Isles that had entirely white primaries but otherwise normally pigmented feathers; the melanism was confined to patches on the tarsi, toes, webs and nails. Sage (1962) noted the combination of albinism and melanism in a Eurasian Curlew (*Numenius arquata*) and a Blue Tit (*Parus caeruleus*) in the British Isles.

Harrison (1963) warned that many cases of so-called melanism have turned out to be "industrial" discoloration. If the Moss Landing bird had been stained, I would have expected the dark plumage to be less uniform and the unpigmented feathers to show some evidence of discoloration. This was not the case.

Any explanation for the unusual plumage in this gull is tenuous at best. Sage (1962) indicated that abnormal melanism and partial albinism can result from a number of different (including nongenetic) phenomena. Partial albinism has been linked to changes in diet (Rollin 1953, 1959), injury (Hutt 1949), disease (Brimley 1944) and possibly shock and age (Sage 1962). Abnormal melanism has been attributed to the dietary deficiency of vitamin D in poultry (Decker and McGinnis 1947). The Mew Gull at Moss Landing appeared to be healthy, and no unusual behavior was noted.

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