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### First record of leucistic jungle babbler at Sahyadri tiger reserve, western Ghats

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#### Abstract

Leucism is a genetic anomaly characterised by reduced amount of melanin pigment in the skin, feathers, or fur of animals. This research article highlights the first recorded observation of a leucistic Jungle Babbler *Argya striata* in the buffer zone of Sahyadri Tiger Reserve in the northern Western Ghats, India. This finding is significant due to the lack of previous documentation of leucism for this species in this region.

The team observed the first recorded instance of a leucistic jungle babbler while following established bird trails at Monarch Eco Resort, in Sonawade village. The Sonawade village is located at a distance of approx. 2 km from the Sahyadri tiger reserve, in the Shahuwadi Taluka of Kolhapur District of Maharashtra State, India.

This rare sighting of the leucistic jungle babbler was identified through its distinct white colouration of the plumage, strikingly in contrast to the typical ash-brown plumage of the species. The record adds valuable data to our understanding of leucism in jungle babblers and also highlights the importance of monitoring bird trails to document and preserve avian biodiversity.

High-resolution photographs and detailed field notes confirm the documentation of the leucistic jungle babbler. The observation emphasises the importance of conservation efforts to preserve genetic diversity and protect habitats vital for such rare avian individuals.

**Keywords:** Leucism, jungle babbler, sahyadri tiger reserve, aberration, western ghats

#### Introduction

The jungle babbler *Argya striata*, belongs to the family Leiothrichidae, native to the Indian subcontinent. It is a social and gregarious bird, with an ash-brown coloured medium-sized body. It prefers a habitat of dense forests, cultivation lands and scrublands. It is also seen in urban areas with vegetation such as parks and gardens. The species is known for its highly social nature and is generally found in large and noisy flocks.

Aberration refers to a variation or anomaly in genetic material, which can lead to genetic disorders or physical abnormalities. Aberration colouration in birds is rare (Sonar and Shrivastava 2014) <sup>[4]</sup>. In birds, melanins and carotenoids are the pigments responsible for plumage colouration (Van Grouw 2006) <sup>[5]</sup>.

Melanines can occur in birds in two forms, eumelanin and pheomelanin. Both melanins together can give a wide range of greyish-brown colours (Mahabal *et al.* 2016) <sup>[1]</sup>. Leucism is defined as a partial or complete absence of eumelanin and pheomelanin in the feathers of a bird as a result of a genetic abnormality of pigment deposition in the feathers (Sinha and Gupta 2023) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Sahyadri Tiger Reserve (STR), located in the northern Western Ghats of India, spans over an area of 1166 km<sup>2</sup>, jointly comprising Chandoli National Park and Koyna Wildlife Sanctuary (Sharma *et al.* 2024) <sup>[2]</sup>. As there are no published cases of leucism in Jungle Babblers from the Sahyadri Tiger Reserve and its buffer zone, this research article may represent the first photographic documentation of a leucistic Jungle Babbler from this area.

#### Observation

While we were birding near the Monarch Eco Resort, Sonawade on the 31<sup>st</sup> August 2024 at 7.30 am hours, we observed a leucistic Jungle Babbler *Argya striata* among a flock of four Jungle Babblers.



Fig 1 a, b: Images of leucistic Jungle Babbler as recorded on the observed site

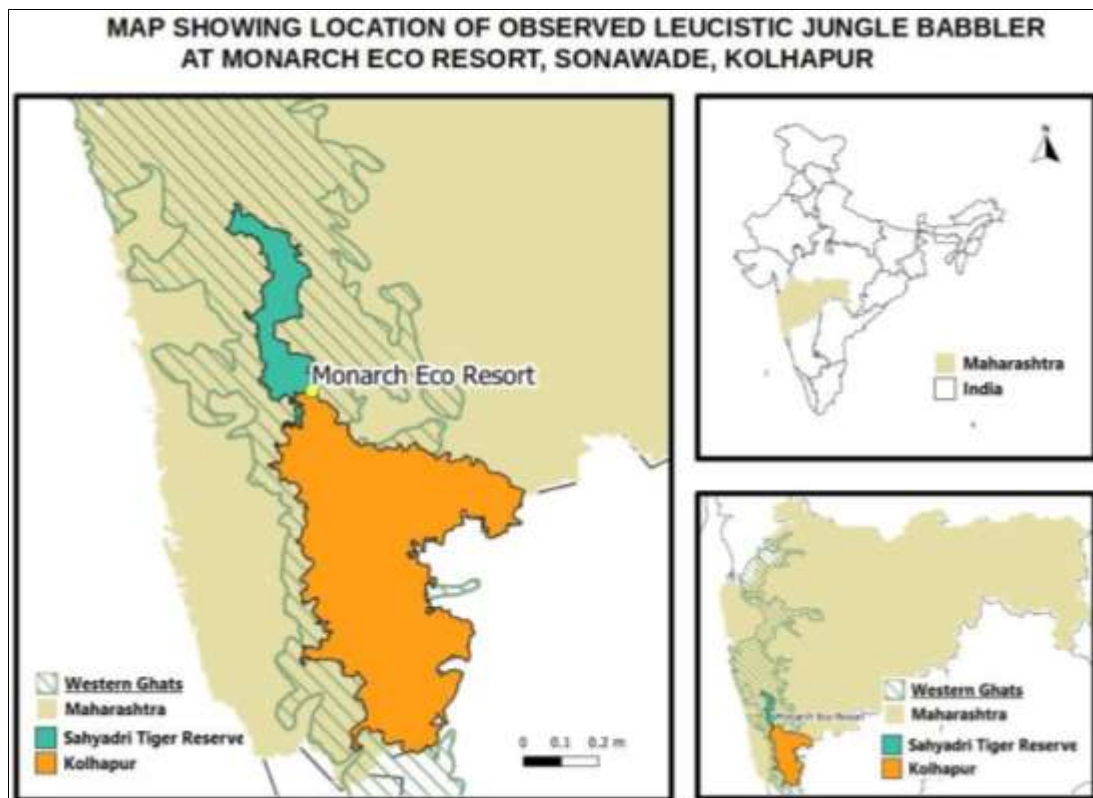


Fig 2: Map showing location of the observed leucistic jungle babbler in the buffer area of Sahyadri Tiger Reserve

The Leucistic babbler had white feathers on its wings while its head and tail were the typical faint brown. Its eyes, bill and legs were the usual yellow. The bird was observed hopping on the ground. It was collecting small roots of plants. We took field notes and documented the bird using a Nikon D7100 DSLR camera.

### Conclusion

Leucism is rare in jungle babblers in the recorded region and it must be a result of possible genetic or environmental factors contributing to this condition. There's future research scope in monitoring leucistic babblers' behaviour and environmental factors affecting leucism in the region. Documenting leucistic jungle babblers can contribute to the conservation and understanding of genetic aberrations in avian species.

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