

Short Communication

Avian baldness: unprecedented Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*) observations in Kerala, India

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Abstract - The Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*) is a frequently observed flocking bird of urban habitats. This paper presents opportunistic observations of two bald Common Mynas from distinct locations in Kerala. While bald Common Mynas have been documented in various regions of India, this paper discusses the first occurrences reported in Kerala. Notably, one of the mynas under investigation in this study is a tamed, free-living bird.

Keyword: Common Myna, baldness, deformities, plumage anomalies, urban birds, avian observation.

Riassunto - Calvizie aviaria: osservazioni inedite di maina comune (*Acridotheres tristis*, Linnaeus, 1766) in Kerala, India

La maina comune, o merlo indiano (*Acridotheres tristis*) è un uccello gregario frequentemente osservato negli habitat urbani. Il presente lavoro presenta osservazioni opportunistiche di due maina comuni calve provenienti da località diverse del Kerala. Sebbene questi uccelli siano stati documentati in varie regioni dell'India, il presente lavoro illustra le prime presenze segnalate in Kerala. In particolare, una delle maina oggetto di questo studio è un uccello addomesticato che vive in libertà.

Parole chiave: maina comune, calvizie, deformità, anomalie del piumaggio, uccelli urbani.

The plumage of birds, collectively referring to the covering of feathers, plays multiple roles, providing insulation, waterproofing, facilitating flight, aiding in camouflage, and serving in sexual and aggressive displays (Dawson, 2015). Anomalies are not uncommon in several avian species, with irregularities often associated with colour aberrations or beak abnormalities (Mahabal *et al.*, 2015; Kushwaha & Kumar, 2018; Pandey & Jangid, 2018). Identifying deformities in rare and less frequently observed bird species poses challenges. However, easily sighted common species offer valuable anomaly detection opportunities. The occurrence of baldness in birds is particularly intriguing. Baldness in birds represents a distinctive anomaly, noteworthy for its infrequency and potential implications for various plumage-related functions. Baldness can significantly influence affected birds, impacting their survival, social interactions, and overall well-being. A comprehensive understanding of the causes and consequences of baldness in birds is important for understanding its impacts on avian health as well as possible impacts on ecological dynamics.

In this report, we document observations of two bald Common Mynas (*Acridotheres tristis*) from two locations approximately 30 km apart in Kollam District, Kerala, India. The Common Myna, a member of the Sturnidae (starling) family, is a resident bird found in both urban and rural habitats. Its distribution spans the entire Indian Subcontinent, reaching up to 3000 m in the Himalayas during the summer (Ali, 2012; Grimmett *et al.*, 2014). As a medium-sized passerine bird native to southern Asia, the Common Myna has successfully established populations well beyond its original range, earning it a position on the IUCN Top 100 Invasive Species List (Lowe *et al.*, 2000). Distinctive features of the Common Myna include a yellow bill, yellow patches behind the eyes, and yellow legs and feet. The head feathers are black, the tail feathers are white-tipped, and the wings exhibit prominent white patches, with sexes appearing similar (Grewal *et al.*, 2002).

During the Kerala State Annual Heronry Survey on Kodi Island (9.03618, 76.51159) on August 17th, 2023, team

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members spotted a bald Common Myna. At first glance, the bird, seen walking and occasionally hopping, gave the impression of being headless. We captured photographs of this peculiar bird and subsequent scrutiny confirmed its identity as a Common Myna exhibiting abnormalities in its plumage. The baldness was not complete. The body was fully feathered, and the back of the head showed some black feathers. The neck and face, however, were completely featherless (Fig. 1 and Supporting Information).

This myna, discovered as a fledgling beneath a tree hollow, was rescued and nurtured by a family for approximately 4 months. Despite leaving the cage door open, the bird often chose to remain inside. Subsequently, it transitioned to roosting in a nearby tree and foraging within the premises. For the first few months of wild roosting, the bird showed no loss of feathers (Fig. 2), but then gradually began losing feathers from its head and neck.

Remarkably, the bird continued to feed from the hands of family members while interacting with other Mynas and participating in foraging activities with wild birds. Despite living freely for a year, its feathers did not regenerate. The bird continued to exhibit normal behaviour, integrating well with other birds, including Common Mynas, without evidence of significant fights. Given that Common Mynas typically reach sexual or reproductive maturity at around one year of age, the bird documented in this study is presumed to be an adult.

A second bald Common Myna was observed in front of Mahatma Gandhi Park in the heart of Kollam City (8.8747603, 76.5937906) on December 19th, 2023 (Fig. 3) and has continued to be seen there almost every day since then. This bird had small patches of feathers on its forehead and its nape. Notably, its nostrils and ear openings were fully exposed, and the neck was featherless, with normal feathers on the breast downwards and covering the rest of the body. This bird was frequently spotted walking



Fig. 1 – The bald Myna from Kodi Island. / La maina calva dell'isola di Kodi.



Fig. 2 – The Myna from Kodi Island, before turning bald. / La maina dell'isola di Kodi, prima di diventare calva.



Fig. 3 – Bald Myna from the Mahatma Gandhi Park area and the bald Myna with its pair. / Maina calva dell'area del Parco Mahatma Gandhi e la maina calva con il suo partner.

with other Common Mynas on sand patches and engaging in foraging activities. If disturbed, the pair signalled each other and took flight.

Multiple instances of bald Common Mynas have been documented in diverse locations across India, including Maharashtra, Chandigarh, Tamil Nadu, and Madhya Pradesh (Kasambe *et al.*, 2010; Ali *et al.* 2013; Sagar *et al.* 2013). Additionally, a bald Pied Starling (*Gracupica contra*) sighting was reported in the Nalgonda district, Telangana, in 2012 (Surender *et al.*, 2015).

The phenomenon of baldness in birds has been ascribed to various factors, including genetic disorders, hormonal imbalances, ecto-parasite infestation, nutritional deficiencies, or molting (Kasambe *et al.*, 2010; Surender *et al.*, 2015). Other potential contributors include genetic predisposition, environmental triggers, illness, or excessive stress. Although factors such as diet, molting, fighting, hormonal imbalances, and mites may play roles in creating baldness, they do not adequately explain the rarity of baldness and its limited occurrence amongst different species. Baldness has not been reported in several other common birds in Kerala, for example, house crows (*Corvus splendens*), egrets, kites, or sunbirds. In India, case reports of baldness in birds are predominantly confined to Common Mynas and Rose-Pinged Parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*). Conspicuously, there has been a lack of scientific studies of this phenomenon, leaving the exact causes of baldness in birds yet to be understood.

In conclusion, it is uncommon to come across a bald bird in the wild. The majority of wild birds keep their feathers in good condition to maintain their capacity to fly, control their body temperature, and exhibit appropriate mating or territorial behaviours. Plumage colouration is also of great importance to birds in camouflage (Barragán-Farías *et al.*, 2019), mate selection (Hill *et al.* 1999), social signalling (Senar, 2006), and other physiological and behavioural processes. If the colour of the plumage is specifically important for the fitness of a bird, loss of feathers from the head or other parts could have significant negative consequences for the bird. For example, it could be more easily spotted by a predator, avoided by a potential mate, or be less effective in thermoregulation.

The bald Mynas reported in this paper do not seem to suffer consequences from their baldness. They are able to flock and forage with conspecifics and heterospecifics and even form pairs with another Myna, as the latter Myna in this study did. Several reasons put forward to explain baldness in birds fall short of a scientific explanation of the phenomenon. It is to be noted that baldness in wild birds is more easily recorded where birds live in close relation with people and in species that inhabit urban settlements, both life traits that could also contribute to baldness *via* stress, the transmission of infective diseases or parasites, wrong diet, *etc.* Opportunistic observations form the basis of the majority of reports of baldness in wild birds. It might not always be easy to determine its cause without close examination. Further investigation is needed to determine the cause of baldness in Common Mynas. A Google Scholar search with appropriate keywords did not identify any relevant papers highlighting the absence of published works on bald Common Mynas from Kerala. To the best of our knowledge, this note describes the first confirmed sighting of a bald Common Myna in Kerala, India.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found online for this article.

Figure S1. Bald myna from the Mahatma Gandhi Park.

Figure S2. Bald myna nearby Mahatma Gandhi Park on a roof.

Video 1. Video of Bald Myna from Mahatma Gandhi Park.

Video 2. Video of Bald Myna from Kodi Island.