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VARIATION IN EYE COLOUR OF BLUE-EARED GLOSSY STARLINGS

by R. Wilkinson

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Bannerman (1953), Hall & Moreau (1970) and Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1973) gave the adult eye colour of Blue-eared Glossy Starlings *Lamprotornis chalybaeus* as yellow, while Bannerman (1930-51) noted that immature eyes are reddish-brown with an outer grey ring. On first encountering the species in northern Nigeria I was intrigued to find that most adults have yellow eyes, but a few birds have vivid red-orange eyes. It led me to examine the series of skins in the British Museum (Natural History) at Tring noting the eye colour, sex and subspecies as recorded on the label. I follow White (1962) in including *L. c. hartlaubi* and *L. c. chalybaeus*, and for the geographical distribution of subspecies.

JUVENILES

Of three birds in juvenile plumage two were noted as having brown irises and the third as 'dull milky grey'. Birds in transitional plumage had eye colours of shades of yellow (six birds), red-brown (two birds, one with outer ring grey) and red (a single immature male).

ADULTS

Numbers of white, yellow, orange and red-eyed birds of each subspecies are given in Table 1. That includes all birds in adult plumage (whether recorded by the collector on the basis of gonadal development as adult or immature). When intermediate colours were noted (e.g. orange-yellow), the final colour (i.e. yellow) was taken to be dominant; it reduced the number of colour categories to manageable proportions but entailed sacrifice of intermediate shades and of such evocative descriptions as 'primrose aureolian' and 'cadmium orange'.

Commonest eye colours are yellow and orange. Red was recorded in only three birds (all males) and white only once, but no obvious correlation was apparent with respect to eye colour and sex. The predominant eye colour differed in the different subspecies, the geographical distribution of which is indicated in Fig. 1.

Yellow is the commonest eye colour in *L. c. chalybaeus* (West Africa east to Sudan) and in *L. c. cyaniventris* (centred on Ethiopia) with which it intergrades (White 1962). Yellow is also the most frequent colour in intergrades between *L. c. cyaniventris* and the more southerly *L. c. sycobius*, although in the latter orange and yellow-eyed birds are equally represented. The very small sample of *L. c. nordmanni* (southern Africa) are all orange-eyed.

TABLE 1 Eye colour in *Lamprotornis chalybaeus*

	White			Yellow			Orange			Red		
	♂	♀	?	♂	♀	?	♂	♀	?	♂	♀	?
L. c. chalybaeus (incl *L. c. hartlaubi*)				9	3	0	1	0	0			
L. c. cyaniventris	1	0	0	16	9	0	3	2	0			
L. c. cyaniventris × *sycobius*				8	7	3	2	0	0	1	0	0
L. c. sycobius				6	5	1	6	9	0	2	0	0
L. c. nordmanni							2	4	0			

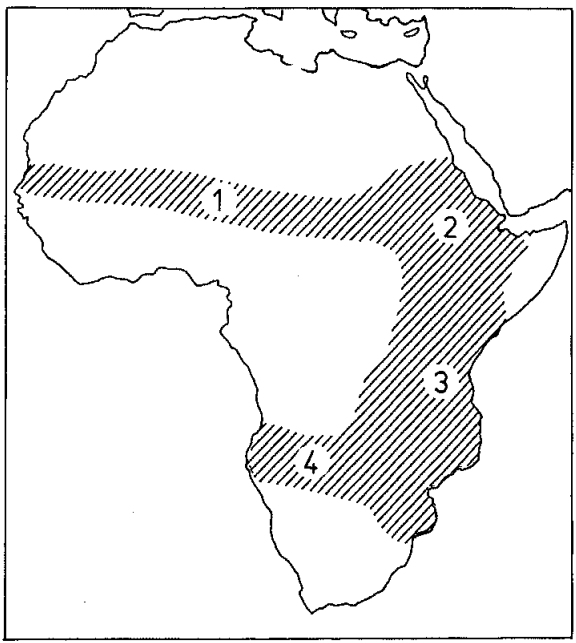

FIGURE 1 Distribution of Blue-eared Glossy Starlings (after Hall & Moreau 1970). Centres of distribution of subspecies: 1 = *L. c. chalybaeus*, 2 = *L. c. cyaniventris*, 3 = *L. c. sycobius*, 4 = *L. c. nordmanni*.

Museum observations are consistent with geographical variation in eye-colour of *L. chalybaeus* suggested by descriptions in field guides: yellow in West Africa, orange-yellow in East Africa and orange in southern Africa (Serle & Morel 1977, Williams & Arlott 1980, Prozesky 1974). However, such geographical variation in eye colour is complicated by the considerable individual variation within each subspecies (Table 1) and at least in the case of *L. c. chalybaeus* even within a single population.

REFERENCES

PROZESKY, O.P.M. (1974) A Field Guide to the Birds of Southern Africa. 2nd edition, Collins: London.

WILLIAMS, J.G. & ARLOTT, N. (1980) A Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern Africa. Collins: London.

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LONG-TAILED NIGHTJAR DRINKING IN FLIGHT - Pettet (1982, *Brit. Birds* 75: 377) reviews published records of nightjars (*Caprimulgus* spp.) taking water in flight; in view of the difficulties inherent in observing nightjars, the habit of drinking in flight seems rather common. The following observation adds the Long-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus climacurus* to the list of published records.

The observation was made after dark on 29 March 1983 at Tambacounda, Senegal. Many bats, primarily Microchiroptera, were drinking from a swimming pool by skimming the surface in the manner of hirundines drinking on open water. A Long-tailed Nightjar made a circuit of the pool, without attempting to drink, before disappearing into the darkness outside the circle of pool lighting. It reappeared after a few seconds, flew slowly and low to a position about 20 cm above the water where it hovered briefly and clumsily before dropping to the surface, dipping its beak and flying away. The tail was raised while the bird was close to the water surface. The same or another nightjar returned to drink three more times in the following hour. On one of these occasions the bird mis-timed its descent and caught its wings in the water, causing it to land on the surface, but it succeeded in raising itself and flew away. On two of the approaches, the bird hovered more than once, at successively lower altitudes above the water, before drinking. This drinking technique seems more laboured than that used by hirundines and other nightjars (Pettet, *loc. cit.*) and may indicate that Long-tailed Nightjars are less adept at slow or skimming flight, although the proximity of trees to the pool may have restricted the flight path.

The pool was chlorinated, but that did not deter bird or bats from drinking. At the end of the dry season in the Sahel, there were few other sources of water available in the area. However, hirundines frequently drink from swimming-pools in West Africa (pers. obs.) even when other water sources are available nearby.

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