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A case of colour aberration in Stripe-necked Mongoose *Herpestes vitticollis* in the Western Ghats, India

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Abstract

A colour-aberrant Stripe-necked Mongoose *Herpestes vitticollis* has been observed over three years near the town of Valparai in the Anamalai hills, Tamil Nadu, India. This individual lacks the black and grey colours on its face, legs and tail-tip and the dark stripe on the neck is pale brown. Thereby, the animal looks uniformly pale orange in colour.

Keywords: Anamalai hills, mutation Brown, pelage coloration, Valparai

The Stripe-necked Mongoose *Herpestes vitticollis*, the largest of the mongooses in Asia, is found along the Western Ghats in south India and in Sri Lanka. The species occurs in a wide range of habitats ranging from wet evergreen forests to dry deciduous forests, and some non-forest habitats (Mudappa 2013).

The typical pelage colour of the Stripe-necked Mongoose is rufous, sometimes grizzled. The head is small, pointed and greyish in colour. The chest and legs are dark to nearly black in colour. The tail, reddish with a black tip, is usually carried horizontal with the tip turned upwards. The species gets its name from the distinct black stripe, bordered by white, marked on either side of the neck, behind the ears (Fig. 1). Along the Western Ghats, the colour varies: individuals in the southern Western Ghats are redder than those in the northern parts (Van Rompaey & Jayakumar 2003). However, Van Rompaey & Jayakumar (2003) in their review of the species have not reported the occurrence of any colour aberration in Stripe-necked Mongoose.

Here, we report a colour aberration in Stripe-necked Mongoose seen in the town of Valparai, Anamalai hills, Tamil



Fig. 1. A Stripe-necked Mongoose *Herpestes vitticollis* of typical colour in Valparai, Anamalai hills, India (July 2010). Note the colours – rufous and grizzled body and tail; dark chest and legs, grey face, black tail-tip (Photo: Kalyan Varma).



Fig. 2. Pale orange-coloured Stripe-necked Mongoose *Herpestes vitticollis* lacking the darker pelage including the tail-tip and legs, with the dark neck-strip of a pale brown colour. Valparai, Anamalai hills, India, 15 April 2014 (Photo: R. Ganesh).

Nadu (10°19'49"N, 76°57'36"E; datum WGS84; altitude 1,134 m) from 2011 to date. It seemed to be a sub-adult (judging by the size) when it was first seen. Now it is a full-grown adult. Stripe-necked Mongooses are seen quite frequently in this region and the individuals usually have the typical reddish pelage. This particular individual has a noticeably different coloration. It lacks the dark pigmentation of the pelage all over and does not have the black tail tip or legs. It is uniformly pale orange (Fig 2a) with the head much lighter than the rest of the body. The normally black neck-stripe (Fig. 2b) is pale brown. This animal is seen almost every day, using the same trail, at the edge of Valparai town. The regularity of the animal's appearance, its consistent habits and the observations of its growth indicates that only one individual is involved.

The main pigment that causes the reddish-brown appearance in the Stripe-necked Mongoose is phaeomelanin. Although the colour aberration reported here is paler than the typical form seen in the area, the individual is not an albino because its eye colour is dark as in typical individuals, and because albinos lack all melanins: this animal retains the typical phaeomelanin colours in the pelage. This aberration appears to result from the mutation Brown (Tyrp1b, Tyrosinase-related protein 1), where the eumelanin is not fully oxidised and therefore blacks and greys (dependent on the density of eumelanin granules) of the pelage appear as brown to pale brown (van Grouw 2013).

Colour variations in small carnivores are slowly coming to the attention of field researchers (e.g. Ross *et al.* 2012, Chunekar 2014), with increases in the number of photographers and use of camera-traps. A greater understanding of the kind and cause of colour aberrations in mammals would be useful. It is important to note this as identification of small carnivores can be very tricky because of fleeting glimpses and thus misidentifications are possible. However, in this region, where Stripe-necked Mongooses are quite frequently seen, this is the only individual of this coloration seen thus far.

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