

MELANISTIC TREE SWALLOW IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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An abnormal excess of dark (brown or black) pigment causes melanism in animals. It occurs less frequently than albinism (no pigments), leucism (paleness), or erythrism (reddishness) but may be found in culmination with partial albinism (Welty 1975). In North America, Gross (1965) reported abnormal melanism in 29 species of 15 families of birds of which the Falconiformes (Birds of Prey) were the only group to regularly possess a light and a dark phase in their plumage. In British Columbia, this naturally occurring melanic form is most noticeable in the Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), Red-tailed Hawk (*B. jamaicensis*), and Rough-legged Hawk (*B. lagopus*).

On 21 May 2006, while travelling on Highway 97 about 10.6 km north of 100 Mile House, British Columbia, the senior author noticed a flock of eight

to 10 Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) foraging dangerously low over the highway about 30 m in front of his car. By the time he reached the location the vehicle ahead of him hit one of the birds that dropped to the edge of the highway. At first glance the bird appeared all-dark and it was thought to be a Vaux's Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*) or a Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*). He turned around to pick up the carcass and after a short examination identified it as a melanistic male Tree Swallow. The entire body, including upperparts, underparts, wings, and tail was solid black (Figure 1). Small patches of iridescent greenish blue, when viewed in direct sunlight, were visible on the top of the head, the forehead, the upper central region of the back, and along the scapulars of each wing. The bill and legs were entirely black. The specimen was salvaged and will be donated to a museum.

Gross (1965) and Robertson et al. (1992) does not mention melanism in the Tree Swallow in North America. Recently, however, there are two published references to melanistic Tree Swallows on the continent. Eckert (2002) reported a dark Tree Swallow on 29 May 2002 at Marsh Lake, Yukon Territory and Chris Siddle in Eckert (2003), saw a darker plumaged Tree Swallow near Fort St. John, British Columbia, on 21 May 1985. Chris later noted that the bird was in adult male plumage with iridescent greenish-blue upperparts and dark flat underparts.

Regularly documenting plumage abnormalities is important since they could have conservation implications. These may alert ornithologists to conditions that arise from mutagenic effects of exposure to environmental contaminants, changes in an animal's diet, or an increasing or decreasing frequency in changes of plumage colouration over time that may be cause for concern.

Literature Cited

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Figure 1. Melanistic male Tree Swallow, dorsal (left) and ventral (right) views, killed by a collision with a vehicle 10.6 km north of 100 Mile House, BC. 21 May 2006 (R. Wayne Campbell). BC Photo 3292.

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About the Authors

Wayne is co-founder and a Director of the Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies and has published and lectured extensively on wildlife in British Columbia.

Chris is a recently retired teacher who has been active in British Columbia birding since about 1961 when he won second prize in an Grade 6 book review content and bought his first field guide with

his winnings. Since then he has been a Christmas Bird Count compiler, regional editor for *American Birds* magazine, and field editor for the four-volume set of *The Birds of British Columbia* project. He is presently a Director for the Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies.