

## Photospot:

# Aberrant Grey-backed Camaroptera *Camaroptera brachyura* in Cameroon

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**Observation d'une Camaroptère à tête grise *Camaroptera brachyura* au plumage aberrant.** La Camaroptère à tête grise *Camaroptera brachyura* est une espèce commune et répandue en Afrique subsaharienne. Le 26 juillet 2012, un individu au plumage aberrant a été capturé près de Wum, Région du Nord-Ouest, Cameroun. Cet oiseau avait la tête, la nuque, le croupion, la poitrine et le ventre blanchâtres et les ailes brunes, mais possédait un bec et un iris de couleur normale. Cette aberration est probablement causée par le « grisonnement progressif » et par l'absence de caroténoïdes jaunes, qui, avec les mélanines, produisent la coloration verte.

Grey-backed Camaroptera *Camaroptera brachyura* is common and widespread in sub-Saharan Africa (Urban *et al.* 1997, Ryan 2006). Sixteen or seventeen subspecies are recognised, which are generally divided into the green-backed 'nominate group' and grey-backed 'brevicaudata group', and sometimes treated as separate species, Green-backed Camaroptera *C. brachyura* and Grey-backed Camaroptera *C. brevicaudata* (Ryan 2006, Dickinson & Christidis 2014). In Cameroon, as over the rest of western Africa, there are two races, the forest zone form *tincta* and the paler savanna form *brevicaudata* (Borrow & Demey 2014). Grey-backed Camaroptera has a dark grey head, neck and back, a paler grey breast, fading to whitish on the central belly (Fig. 1). The short wings are green and the tail is brown. The tibial feathers are orangey. The legs are pinkish, the eyes brown and the bill black. *C. b. brevicaudata* assumes a non-breeding, mainly ashy-brown, plumage in the dry season (Borrow & Demey 2014).

On 26 July 2012, I mist-netted a small, conspicuously coloured passerine near Wum, c.47 km north of Bamenda, North-west Region, Cameroon (06°24'01"N 10° 03'36"E), in an area dominated by cornfields, small stands of trees and bushes, and a patch of elephant grass *Pennisetum purpureum*. The bird was white or whitish on the head, neck, rump, breast and belly, and the short wings were brown (Fig. 2). The tail was short and brown, the eyes pale brown, the bill black, the legs were pinkish and the tibial feathers orangey. The shape and colour of the bare parts, as well as the shape of the wing and tail, and the colour of the tail and thigh feathers, suggest the bird was an aberrant-coloured Grey-backed Camaroptera.

Whitish plumage parts may be due to, e.g., leucism, i.e. the partial or total lack of melanins in feathers and skin, or progressive greying, i.e. the progressive loss of pigment cells with age (van Grouw 2013). In birds, both types of colour aberration have in common that the eyes are always normally coloured. In the early stages of progressive greying, white feathers spread randomly, often on the head and flanks, while the bill and feet retain normal colours (van Grouw 2013). Partially leucistic birds can also have a normally coloured bill and feet, depending on where the colourless patches occur (H. van Grouw *in litt.* 2015). The Wum bird has a normally coloured bill, surrounded by white feathers extending over the head, neck and breast. A leucistic bird with this pattern of white feathering would probably have had a colourless bill (H. van Grouw *in litt.* 2015). Therefore, this individual is almost certainly an example of progressive greying. The bird also has another type of pigment deficiency: it lacks the green coloration of the upperwing-coverts and the upper side of the primaries, which is characteristic of normal-coloured individuals of this species. This is due to the lack of yellow carotenoids, which together with melanins produce the green colour (S. Andersson *in litt.* 2015). Carotenoids cannot be synthesised by birds and must therefore be acquired from food. Causes for the absence of carotenoid in the plumage are genetic mutations (very rare), absence of carotenoids in food (unlikely) or the inability to process the carotenoids into colour due to a physical disorder (Prager *et al.* 2009; H. van Grouw *in litt.* 2015). A combination of these causes has been observed in, e.g., Yellow-mantled Widowbird





**Figure 1.** Grey-backed Camaroptera *Camaroptera brevicaudata tincta* with normal-coloured plumage, Douala, Cameroon, 15 September 2012 (Bernard Guévorts)

Camaroptère à tête grise *Camaroptera brachyura* au plumage normal, Douala, Cameroun, 15 septembre 2012 (Bernard Guévorts)



**Figure 2.** Grey-backed Camaroptera *Camaroptera brachyura* with aberrant plumage caused by progressive greying and a lack of yellow carotenoids, Wum, Cameroon, 26 July 2012 (Christer G. Wiklund)

Camaroptère à tête grise *Camaroptera brachyura* au plumage aberrant lié à une condition appelée « grisonnement progressif » et à l'absence de caroténoïdes jaunes, Wum, Cameroun, 26 juillet 2012 (Christer G. Wiklund)

*Euplectes macrourus* (Andersson *et al.* 2007). To my knowledge, this is the first observation of these two types of colour aberrations in a Grey-backed Camaroptera.

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