

POSSIBLE MELANISTIC NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW

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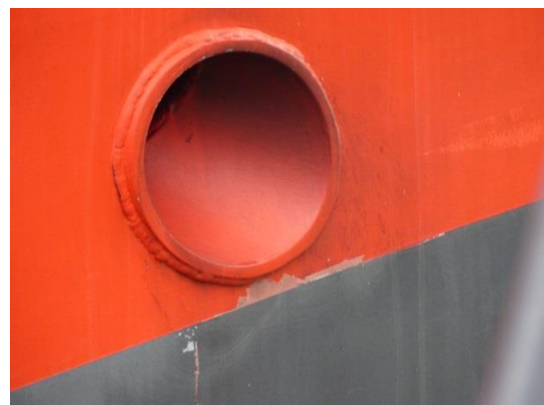
On 8 May 2013 while participating in the census of the Port Weller West Pier woods during the May 2013 migration study, John Black observed a small dark swallow flying around the Canadian Coast Guard Station. His first impression was that this different-looking bird had somehow become oiled. The next day, 9 May 2013, Black, along with Daniel Salisbury, once again saw the same dark-looking bird only this time it was gathering nesting material and taking it towards the backside of the moored Coast Guard vessel. To their total surprise the bird flew with this collected matter directly into the exhaust port opening where she was in the process of building her nest. I photographed the bird on 10 May 2013.



Moored at the station dock was the Canadian Coast Guard vessel “Cape Storm” a 47' search and rescue vessel.



Stern of vessel Cape Storm



Exhaust port opening

A Coast Guard crew member told Black and me that this exhaust port was the exit for water that is drawn in to keep the engines cool when the boat is running. Captain Larry Trudel, the Coast Guard Commanding Officer told me that most, but perhaps not all of the carbon build-up, but clearly all of the nesting material amassed inside this port area would be completely flushed out when the powerful engines were turned on. The Coast Guard vessel motors are turned on every day consequently the nesting opportunity failed and this dark-looking Northern Rough-winged Swallow and her mate were last seen at this location on 13 May 2013.

The bird was associating with a Northern Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*) that was likely her mate. I sent my photographs of this dark-looking bird to Ron Pittaway and Willie D'Anna for their evaluation. Pittaway in turn forwarded them to Michel Gosselin at the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa. Both Pittaway and D'Anna felt the bird was possibly a melanistic Northern Rough-winged Swallow. Gosselin agreed it was a Rough-winged Swallow but suggested the bird was more than likely soiled by engine carbon soot rather than being melanistic. Melanism is a genetic mutation that causes the bird to have excess amounts of melanin in its feathers which causes them to be very dark (Cerutti 2012). Melanism while rare is found in a wide variety of birds, animals and snakes and is the opposite of albinism.

One might ask just exactly what melanin is. Melanin, also known as pigment, is a substance that gives the skin and hair its natural color. It also gives color to the feathers of our birds and to the iris of the bird's eye.



Melanistic Northern Rough-winged Swallows are quite rare and have been reported in small numbers over the past few years. Records exist from Springfield, IL in June 2003, Pittsfield, NH in 2010, Gilbert AZ in March 2012 and Broomfield CO in July 2012. As recently as 9 June 2013, a melanistic Northern Rough-winged Swallow was observed in the Buffalo, NY harbour from a boat tour of the area (Michael Morgante, pers. comm.). Since I am not aware of any observations of melanistic birds in Ontario I sent an email request for details to Alan Wormington who retains a complete database on

all Ontario birds. He replied “I have never heard of melanistic birds in Ontario previously” (Alan Wormington, pers. comm.).



Was this bird a melanistic individual or was it soiled by engine soot? Regrettably the bird was not captured for examination. Gosselin’s suggestion of being soiled by soot bears serious consideration because the photographs show that there is a considerable amount of excess dark colour in the tips of the bird’s primary and secondary feathers. This added darker colouring could have been the result of the wing tips scraping the insides of the exhaust port walls. The photographs do however show as well how uniform the dark colouring is all over the bird from head to tail. This colouring appears to be quite evenly spread over the entire bird’s body and not blotchy in appearance. Note in the above rather poor quality photograph the evenly spread dark colour in the head, hind neck and flight feathers. Would engine soot be capable of being spread so evenly as if it were sprayed on the bird? Would the bird while in flight in rain, or looking for nesting material in wet or muddy areas not lose some of this soot if in fact the soot is the cause of this birds colour?

While this was an interesting birding experience the above questions on this individual bird will unfortunately remain forever unanswered.

Acknowledgements

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Literature Cited

Cerutti, Michael. 2012. Online World Bird Sanctuary. education@worldbirdsantuary.org