

Dark Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus* from California is melanistic

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Patten & Wilson (1996) reported a dark Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus* that was represented as a colour morph previously unknown for this species (Bildstein & Meyer 2000). The claim was based on two photographs of a perched juvenile female, one included as their Fig. 1, taken in 1994 by JCW in southern California. Clark & Wheeler (1997) disagreed that this hawk was a dark morph and opined that it was a dark individual of the dark Pacific Northwest subspecies *A. s. perobscurus*. That possibility was denied by Dickerman (2004), who, after examining the original slides, could not determine 'if it is a morph, a phase, or, more likely, simply stained, but the bird definitely cannot be identified as *perobscurus*.'



Figure 1. Melanistic Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus*, southern California, 1994 (John C. Wilson)

MAP and WSC met recently and studied the original photographs, as Clark & Wheeler (1997) had only seen the published photo. We now agree that the hawk was not *A. s. perobscurus*, nor was it a 'dark morph', a term we feel applies best to a plumage persistent in a population rather than just aberrancy. We instead feel that the bird best fits the description 'melanistic'. Similar aberrant plumages have been described as melanistic for many bird species, for example: Pileated Woodpecker *Dryocopus pileatus* (Short 1965), Tree Swallow *Tachycineta bicolor* (Campbell & Siddle 2006), Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* (Berthold *et al.* 1996), and Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea* (Bried *et al.* 2005). It has also been used to describe aberrant plumages in raptors, for example: Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonius* (Howell *et al.* 1992, Olson & Osborn 2000), Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* (Clark 1998) and Black-breasted Buzzard (Eagle) *Geranoaetus melanoleucus* (Clark & Schmitt 2006).

There remains confusion about use of terms. For example, in his authoritative book on the subject, Majerus (1998) defined melanism 'to mean simply: the occurrence in a species of dark or black forms', and Butcher & Rohwer (1989) noted of color dimorphism or polymorphism that 'Many of these involve melanism'. By contrast, Thomsett (2007) asserted that 'The terms melanistic and dark morph should not be interchangeable if the aetiology of these conditions is not clear'. We contend that most scientific literature, bird guides, and handbooks use the term 'dark morph' for regularly occurring dark plumages of birds, a condition unknown in the *A. s. velox* subspecies of Sharp-shinned Hawk, although South American taxa in the Sharp-shinned Hawk species complex (e.g. *A. [s.] ventralis*) do possess a true dark morph. With the terminology clarified, we therefore conclude that this Sharp-shinned Hawk was a melanistic individual, the first to be recorded in North America.

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