

PARTIAL MELANISM IN KING PENGUINS *APTENODYTES PATAGONICUS*

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Although uncommon, abnormal colouration is not unknown in penguins. Full or partial leucism (absence of pigmentation in the plumage) has been documented for at least seven species (Falla 1937, vanWyk 1995, Valencia *et al.* 1997). Melanism, or abnormally dark plumage, is caused by an increase in the amount of eumelanin present in the feathers and has been reported in Adélie *Pygoscelis adeliae* and Royal *Eudyptes schlegeli* Penguins (Falla 1937). It has also been observed in Gentoo *P. papua*, Macaroni *E. chrysolophus* and Chinstrap *P. antarctica* Penguins (Valencia *et al.* 1997, O.A.W. Huyser *in litt.*, D.A. Croll *in litt.*).

Abnormal colouration can be present in all or part of a bird's plumage (Davis & Packer 1972, Bohlen 1993, van Wyk 1995). In February 1996, in the King Penguin *Aptenodytes patagonicus* colony at Salisbury Plain, Bay of Isles, South Georgia (54°02'S, 37°15'W), we observed a partially melanistic adult bird (Fig. 1). King Penguins normally exhibit a white underside, with black plumage limited to the head region and to a narrow margin along the ventral surface of the flippers that widens at their tips. A black border also divides grey dorsal and white ventral plumage, running from the throat to the base of the flippers (Williams 1995). This melanistic individual exhibited no white plumage anywhere on its body. The auricular patches and dorsal surface were normally pigmented, but the remainder of its plumage, including the undersides of the flippers, was jet black in colour, and the orange patch on the upper breast was absent. Bill and eye colouration were normal. Neither size nor behavioural cues allowed us to determine the bird's sex and it did not appear to be breeding. In order to survey current and recent penguin researchers, we posted an enquiry to Seabird-L, the world-wide seabird internet list-server. We received only two other contemporary accounts of melanism in King Penguins: one partially melanistic bird at

Isle Crozet (K.M. Pütz *in litt.*, Fig. 2) and one at Marion Island (D.C. Nel *in litt.*). The melanistic individual sighted at Marion Island showed very similar markings to those described for the South Georgia bird, however, the entire body was a grey/silver colour (similar to the dorsal side of a normal King Penguin) rather than 'jet black' as described for the bird on South Georgia. A single previous record, of a partially black bird, has been published (Rothschild 1905, 1927). Although limited observer effort reduces the chance of such birds being reported there can be little doubt that melanism is exceedingly rare in this species.

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(Right) Fig. 1. Melanistic King Penguin at Salisbury Plain, South Georgia.
(Photo by S. Stevens.)

(Far right) Fig. 2. King Penguin at Isle Crozet showing abnormal colouration on upper breast.
(Photo by K.M. Pütz.)



