

SHORT NOTE

An almost fully melanistic Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*) from Otago

An almost completely black Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*) was observed in the front section of a house at 69 Queens Drive, St. Kilda, Dunedin, between 12 and 24 June, 1998. The bird (Figure 1) was observed from within the lounge, at times from as close as 38 cm, as it fed from feeders situated 37 cm from the large lounge windows. Between 12 June and 14 July 1998 an almost continuous watch of the feeders was maintained during daylight. The melanistic bird's feathers were clean and shining and its colours, which were completely symmetrical, did not change in the time it was visiting. Its colouration was: forehead black, apart from a few green feathers beside upper mandible and a line of green feathers crossing to eye-ring; crown black, except for band of black, variegated with green, near nape; nape and hind neck black; mantle and scapulars variegated grey-black; rump black; upper tail coverts green; tail green; ear coverts black, cheek variegated green-black; sides of neck variegated green-black; throat, chest, breast, sides of abdomen, belly, and flank entirely black; thigh greyish white, undertail coverts white; wing green, except tips of primaries, which were black; eye-ring white. Direct observation and comparison of many photographs suggested that the overall size of the bird was fractionally smaller than that of about 300 other Silvereyes feeding with it. However, the bird was not banded or handled.



FIGURE 1 - Two Silvereyes, melanistic individual on left, female with normal plumage on right.

(Photo: S. Clifford.)

Initially, environmental contamination with oil, tar, soot, pollen, or some other substance was suspected but discounted after direct observation through a lens and following examination of enlargements of the many colour photographs taken. The colour pattern was completely symmetrical and did not change, despite changes in weather, including rain. The bird was observed to bathe repeatedly in a bird bath situated 1.3 metres from the window, and to dry and preen itself in an adjacent rosebush.

A degree of colour variation was present among the Silvereyes and included about 13 individuals with dark speckling on the throat, breast and belly and four partial melanistic birds in which the nape, hind neck, side of neck, throat, chest, breast and belly were very dark.

The almost completely melanistic Silvereye was notably more shy than the other birds.

Approximately the same numbers of Silvereyes have appeared at the feeders every year for the past three years at least. This is the first year that a fully melanistic bird and partially melanistic birds have appeared. In a study of Silvereyes conducted in Dunedin between 1938-1943, Marples (1945) recorded only pale colour variants. Similarly, Oliver (1955) recorded only albinism (and not melanism) among the known colour variants of this species. He noted a specimen in the Otago Museum which was "...white with the back and wing coverts lemon yellow." and that "A specimen in the Auckland Museum has the head, wings, rump and tail canary yellow; back and under surface white; sides of abdomen stained with brown. In this specimen, the green of the normal plumage is replaced by yellow, and the remainder, except the brown sides, is white."

LITERATURE CITED

- MARPLES, B. J. 1945. *Zosterops lateralis* at Dunedin, New Zealand. *Emu* 44: 227-287.
OLIVER, W.R.B. 1955. *New Zealand Birds*. A.H. & A.W. Reed, Wellington.

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