

A partial albino Red-legged Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes cyaneus* in Costa Rica

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Un albino parcial de Mielero Patirrojo *Cyanerpes cyaneus* fue observado varias veces en la Finca Nice, al sudoeste de Costa Rica, entre febrero y julio de 1999. Se presenta una descripción completa y fotografías de este individuo aberrante, y se discuten las razones para identificarlo como *C. cyaneus*.

In early February 1999, BN noticed an unusual bird on his property (Finca Nice) in south-west Costa Rica. The 2.5 ha property, overlooking the Pacific Coast, is at 50 m elevation, between the towns of Dominical and Uvita. The striking small passerine (Figs. 1–2) was seen several times over the next six months and was photographed in late February. It was frequently accompanied by a female Red-legged Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes cyaneus*, a common species at the ranch, and was most often seen with mixed flocks of other tanagers (e.g. Golden-hooded Tanager *Tangara larvata*, Palm Tanager *Thraupis palmarum*, and Blue Dacnis *Dacnis cayana*).

The following description was compiled from 11 photos taken in late February by BN. Underparts and rump largely blue. Remiges, greater and median wing-coverts, rectrices and mantle black. Scapulars and lesser wing-coverts mostly blue, mixed with some pale yellowish white; the pattern appears similar on both sides of the bird. Thighs white. Hood white, becoming pale yellowish white on hindcrown, and forming an irregular lower border on breast and back; the chin has a few blue feathers. Bill pale salmon. Legs bright orange-red. Iris appears dark. Although reminiscent in shape and the largely blue plumage to a male Red-legged Honeycreeper, the whitish head and red bill were incorrect for that species, and BN was unable identify it from Stiles & Skutch⁹.

Upon returning to the USA, BN contacted AWK to identify the bird based on the 11 photographs he had taken. Its size and shape were similar to the female Red-legged Honeycreeper in Fig. 2. Aside from its colour, the bill was similar to the female in its length and curvature. As no other small Neotropical passerines have such long curved bills, it appeared probable that it was a *Cyanerpes* honeycreeper, at least in part if hybridisation was involved. Excepting the white areas and reddish bill, the mostly blue body and black back, wings, and tail were similar to an adult male Red-legged Honeycreeper in 'breeding' plumage^{6,7,9}. These characters, along with it being accompanied by a female *C. cyaneus*, led us to believe that it was a partial albino, adult male, Red-legged Honeycreeper. Partial albinos are defined as having only parts of their plumage and/or soft parts lacking pigment^{4,8}. This

individual lacked pigment in its bill and most of its head and thighs, and partially in its scapulars and lesser and median wing-coverts; the irides, legs, posterior body, wings and tail appeared normal.

The only other vaguely similar species expected in Costa Rica, Shining Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes lucidus*, has a shorter bill than *C. cyaneus*, yellow legs, a blue back and a black throat^{6,7,9}. Females of the two species are also quite similar^{6,7,9}. The post-breeding plumage of male Red-legged Honeycreeper⁷ does not explain this individual's pattern, as this bird lacked the female-like greenish body plumage and blurry streaks, and had always been observed in the same plumage. A hybrid origin, with one parent a *Cyanerpes* honeycreeper, did not appear likely because no close relative has a white or pale head. White actually is rare in the plumage of close relatives (*Cyanerpes*, *Dacnis*, *Chlorophanes*; see Isler & Isler⁶). No exotic species is similar to the bird.

In July 1999, BN returned to his property and relocated the albino honeycreeper. The persistence of the bird's white plumage, as well as the reddish bill, lead us to believe that albinism has a genetic basis and does not result from such factors as diet or shock⁴.

This appears to be the first reported instance of albinism in Red-legged Honeycreeper or in *Cyanerpes*. In addition, we can find no reference to reported albinism in closely related genera (e.g. *Chlorophanes*, *Dacnis*), which were formerly classified with *Cyanerpes* in the Coerebidae (e.g. AOU²). Albinism appears to be a rare phenomenon throughout the expanded family Thraupidae³, which includes *Cyanerpes* and the above genera. Large collections of Neotropical birds that lack noticeably albino or partially albino tanager specimens include Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Science (LSU, J. V. Remsen pers. comm.), the W. H. Phelps Collection in Caracas, Venezuela (R. Restall pers. comm.), Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard (A. Pirie pers. comm.) and Florida Museum of Natural History (FLMNH). Gross⁴ reported 15 specimens of albino tanagers among two North American species, although he listed neither the particular species nor the degree of albinism. All 15 specimens presumably belong to *Piranga*, as all



Figure 1. Partial albino male Red-legged Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes cyaneus*, with female, south-west Costa Rica, February 1999 (Brian Nice)



Figure 2. Partial albino male Red-legged Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes cyaneus*, south-west Costa Rica, February 1999 (Brian Nice)

four regularly occurring tanager species in North America (north of Mexico, as per AOU¹) are in this genus. The only other report is by Herrera⁵, who observed a partial albino female Guira Tanager *Hemithraupis guira* in north-east Argentina. In contrast, albinism is relatively common among Icterinae (Gross⁴; LSU and FLMNH specimens), a related subfamily within the nine-primaried oscine assemblage.

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