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PLUMAGE ABERRATIONS IN ICTERIDAE IN BRAZIL

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Abstract. Plumage aberrations are uncommon phenomena in wild birds and remain poorly documented in neotropical taxa. Here, we provide the first synthesis of melanin-related plumage aberrations in Icteridae from Brazil based on published literature and online ornithological platforms and report a new case of aberrant plumage in the Giant Cowbird *Molothrus oryzivorus*. We compiled 32 documented records involving eight species from seven genera across nine Brazilian states, within the Atlantic Forest, Cerrado, and Pampa. Progressive greying was the most frequently assigned diagnosis (65.6%), whereas five records could not be confidently assigned to a single category. Most records came from Rio Grande do Sul and São Paulo. Because photographic diagnoses may be uncertain, records were classified only when diagnostic features were sufficiently visible, and uncertain cases were explicitly indicated. The Giant Cowbird exhibited predominantly whitish plumage but retained pigmentation in the bill and feet, ruling out complete albinism. Our results show that plumage aberrations in Brazilian Icteridae remain scarce and geographically uneven and highlight both the value and the limitations of online ornithological platforms for documenting rare

phenotypes.

Keywords: Aberrant plumage; Baybird; Cacique; Cowbird; Bird coloration; Bird pigmentation; Oriole.

Plumage color aberrations encompass atypical color patterns involving different components of feather coloration, including melanin, carotenoids, and structural coloration (McCardle 2012, Guay et al. 2012). Aberrations may result from changes in the presence, production, or deposition of pigments in feathers and, deliberately excluding the full spectrum of plumage color aberrations, seven main melanin-related aberrations have been recognized (van Grouw 2021). Leucism is a congenital absence of melanin-producing cells, often resulting in patchy white feathers while eye pigmentation remains unaffected (Urcola 2011, Villegas Retana 2022, van Grouw 2021). Progressive greying involves the progressive loss of melanin-producing cells, resulting in an increasing number of white feathers over time (Martins-Silva et al. 2016, van Grouw 2021, Machado-Teixeira & Dias 2025). Brown results from a qualitative reduction of eumelanin, causing normally black areas to appear brownish (Petry et al. 2017, Corrêa et al. 2020). Dilution produces a paler version of normal coloration through quantitative changes in melanin deposition (Riveros & Velázquez 2019, van Grouw 2021, Cadena-Ortiz et al. 2024). Because terminology has historically been used inconsistently (Urcola 2011, Guay et al. 2012, van Grouw 2021, Cadena-Ortiz et al. 2024), diagnoses in this study were standardized following van Grouw (2021) and Cadena-Ortiz et al. (2024).

Across neotropical and museum datasets, leucism has often been reported as the most common aberration. It represented 73% of Ecuadorian wild-bird aberrations (Cadena-Ortiz et al. 2015) and 40.5% of aberrant museum specimens in Argentina (Urcola 2011). It has also been described as one of the most frequently reported aberrations in wild birds (Guay et al. 2012, Villegas Retana 2022, van Grouw 2021). Progressive greying is also frequent and was the most common condition among 86 aberrant Rufous-collared Sparrows *Zonotrichia capensis* (50 cases) (Cadena-Ortiz et al. 2024); it has

repeatedly been recorded in Brazil (Martins-Silva et al. 2016, Lambert et al. 2020, Machado-Teixeira & Dias 2025). Rarer types include brown and other variations such as ino, erythromelanism, and schizochroism, which have been reported in small numbers or single individuals (Hosner & Lebbin 2006, Urcola 2011, Petry et al. 2017, Reyes & Ortiz-Catedral 2023). Melanism has been described as infrequent in some groups, such as hummingbirds (Cadena-Ortiz et al. 2015).

In Ecuador, the Greater Thrush *Turdus fuscater* and Rufous-collared Sparrow each had five aberrant individuals and were the most frequently reported species (Cadena-Ortiz et al. 2015). A broader review of Rufous-collared Sparrow found all seven main aberration types — progressive greying was the most common (Cadena-Ortiz et al. 2024). Chromatic aberrations are documented for many neotropical families, including Passerellidae, Icteridae and Thraupidae. Overall, neotropical reports suggest common, widespread passerines (e.g. *Turdus*, *Zonotrichia*, *Sporophila*, *Volatinia*) yield more aberrant individuals, likely reflecting both true occurrence and observer bias (Cadena-Ortiz et al. 2015). Icteridae, however, are not the most frequently affected group in current datasets (Hosner & Lebbin 2006, Urcola 2011, Cadena-Ortiz et al. 2015, Verea 2020). Museum specimens from Argentina show four aberrations in Icteridae (Urcola 2011). Ecuadorian records indicate aberrations in Icteridae and note that similar patterns likely occur in *Molothrus*, *Sturnella* and *Quiscalus* based on South American reports (Cadena-Ortiz et al. 2015).

Species reported with melanin-related plumage aberrations in Brazilian passerines include cases of leucism in Planalto Slaty-Antshrike *Thamnophilus pelzelni* and Rock Tapaculo *Scytalopus petrophilus* (Freitas et al. 2020), Rufous-capped Spinetail *Synallaxis ruficapilla* (Meyer & Crozariol 2020), Crested Black-Tyrant *Knipolegus lophotes* (Santos et al. 2011), Rufous-bellied Thrush *Turdus rufiventris* (Junior et al. 2008, Santos et al. 2011, Mohr et al. 2017, Lambert et al. 2020), House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* (Ribeiro & Gogliath 2012, Meyer & Crozariol 2020), Grassland Sparrow *Ammodramus humeralis* (Quirino & Corrêa 2018), Serra Finch *Microspingus lateralis* (Crozariol et al. 2013), Ruby-crowned Tanager *Tachyphonus coronatus* (Meyer & Crozariol 2020), and Fawn-

breasted Tanager *Pipraeidea melanonota* (Cavarzere & Tonetti 2015). Albinism has been reported in Rufous-bellied Thrush *Turdus rufiventris* (Santos et al. 2011, Lambert et al. 2020, Rödel et al. 2020). Cases of progressive greying have been documented in Pin-tailed Manakin *Ilicura militaris* (Anciães et al. 2005), Rufous Hornero *Furnarius rufus* and Fork-tailed Flycatcher *Tyrannus savana* (Dias et al. 2023), Rufous-browed Peppershrike *Cyclarhis gujanensis* (Silva et al. 2021), Blue-and-white Swallow *Pygochelidon cyanoleuca* (Machado-Teixeira & Dias 2025), Rufous-bellied Thrush (Rödel et al. 2020), Pale-breasted Thrush *Turdus amaurochalinus* (Vieira et al. 2018), Chalk-browed Mockingbird *Mimus saturninus* (Lambert et al. 2020), Brazilian Tanager *Ramphocelus bresilius* (Corrêa et al. 2018), Red-crested Cardinal *Paroaria coronata* (Machado-Teixeira & Dias 2025), and three Icteridae species (Meyer & Crozariol 2020). A brown mutation has been reported in Boat-billed Flycatcher *Megarynchus pitangua* (Crozariol et al. 2013).

Records of plumage abnormalities have been reported in six of the 43 Icteridae species which occur in Brazil (Pacheco et al. 2021), including Grayish Baywing *Agelaioides badius* (Corrêa et al. 2013, Andriola & Marcon 2017), Yellow-winged Blackbird *Agelasticus thilius* (Urcola 2011), Red-rumped Cacique *Cacicus haemorrhous* (Meyer & Crozariol 2020), Chestnut-capped Blackbird *Chrysomus ruficapillus* (Meyer & Crozariol 2020, Machado-Teixeira & Dias 2025, Juárez et al. 2026), Screaming Cowbird *Molothrus rufoaxillaris* (Urcola 2011), and Shiny Cowbird *Molothrus bonariensis* (Fuentes & González-Acuña 2011, Urcola 2011, Aráoz et al. 2012, Cadena-Ortiz et al. 2015, Sainz-Borgo et al. 2016, Rödel et al. 2020, Meyer & Crozariol 2020, Cárdenas Carmona & Franco 2021, Smith et al. 2025). However, records from Brazil have been documented for four of these species: Grayish Baywing (Corrêa et al. 2013, Andriola & Marcon 2017), Red-rumped Cacique (Meyer & Crozariol 2020), Chestnut-capped Blackbird (Meyer & Crozariol 2020, Machado-Teixeira & Dias 2025), and Shiny Cowbird (Meyer & Crozariol 2020, Rödel et al. 2020).

Here, we compiled records of melanin-related plumage aberrations in Icteridae species recorded within Brazil using published literature and online ornithological platforms, providing the

first synthesis of these conditions in the family. Additionally, we report a new case of aberrant plumage in Giant Cowbird *Molothrus oryzivorus*, obtained opportunistically during non-standardized bird observations. Records were consulted from published literature and online ornithological platforms (iNaturalist, Macaulay Library and WikiAves). Literature searches were conducted using Google Scholar with English and Portuguese keywords related to plumage aberrations in a search string combining Boolean operators, family, and country: (aberra* OR leucism OR albinism OR melanism OR greying OR brown OR ino) AND (Icteridae) AND (Brazil). Only records supported by photographic evidence were included, and duplicates were removed based on species identity, locality, and record identification. Geographic coordinates were assigned using the centroid of municipalities when precise locations were unavailable.

Photographic records were first screened to confirm that the observed coloration represented a plumage aberration rather than a non-pigmentary artifact. We evaluated the extent and distribution of atypical coloration, symmetry when informative, consistency across visible feather tracts and among multiple images when available, and pigmentation of the eyes, bill, and feet. Records were excluded when the apparent anomaly could plausibly be explained by molt, feather wear, staining or soiling, shadows, overexposure, or other image artifacts. A specific diagnosis was assigned following van Grouw (2021) and Cadena-Ortiz et al. (2024) only when the visible characteristics were sufficiently diagnostic. When diagnostic features were insufficient for an unequivocal assignment, records were marked as uncertain (?) and, when appropriate, plausible alternative diagnoses were indicated.

We compiled 32 records of plumage aberrations involving eight species from seven genera across nine Brazilian states (Table 1, Figure 1). Eight records were documented in the published literature, two of which were also available on WikiAves. Online ornithological platforms accounted for 25 records, including five from Macaulay Library and 20 from WikiAves, while one additional record corresponds to the present study; no records were obtained from iNaturalist. Rio Grande do Sul accounted for 28.1% of all records (n = 9), São Paulo for 25.0% (n = 8), and Santa Catarina for

12.5% (n = 4). Goiás, Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, and Paraná each accounted for 6.3% (n = 2), whereas Espírito Santo, Minas Gerais, and the Distrito Federal each accounted for 3.1% (n = 1). Geographically, records occurred in the Atlantic Forest, Cerrado and Pampa and were concentrated in southern and southeastern Brazil, with Rio Grande do Sul, São Paulo, and Santa Catarina together accounting for 65.6% (n = 21) of all cases.

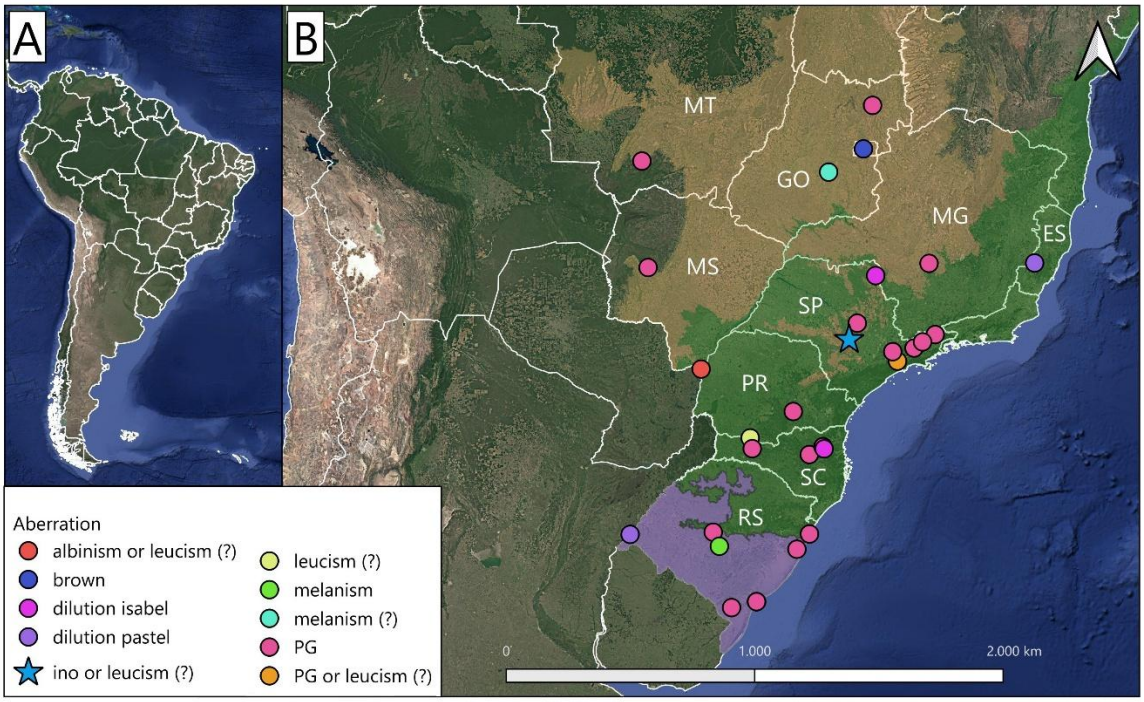


Figure 1. (A) Location of Brazil in South America. (B) Geographic distribution of documented records of plumage aberrations in Brazilian Icteridae based on published literature and online ornithological platforms. Colored background areas indicate the biomes represented in the study area: Atlantic Forest (green), Cerrado (beige), and Pampa (purple). Circles indicate previously documented records and their presumed diagnoses, as shown in the legend; the star denotes the Giant Cowbird *Molothrus oryzivorus* record reported in the present study. PG = progressive greying; (?) indicates an uncertain diagnosis. Federative unit abbreviations: DF = Distrito Federal; ES = Espírito Santo; GO = Goiás; MG = Minas Gerais; MS = Mato Grosso do Sul; MT = Mato Grosso; PR = Paraná; RS = Rio Grande do Sul; SC = Santa Catarina; SP = São Paulo.

Table 1. Records of plumage aberrations in Brazilian Icteridae compiled from published literature and online ornithological platforms. Abbreviations: FU = Federative unit: DF = Distrito Federal; ES = Espírito Santo; GO = Goiás; MG = Minas Gerais; MS = Mato Grosso do Sul; MT = Mato Grosso; PR = Paraná; RS = Rio Grande do Sul; SC = Santa Catarina; SP = São Paulo. Source based on literature or ornithological platforms WA = WikiAves and ML = Macaulay Library. Presumed diagnoses follow van Grouw (2021) and Cadena-Ortiz et al. (2024).

Species	Locality	FU	Source	Diagnoses
Agelaioides badius	Poconé	MT	ML630032693	Progressive greying

	Poconé	MT	WA2233561	Progressive greying
	Clevelândia	PR	Andriola & Marcon (2017); WA922776	Leucism (?)
	São Sepé	RS	Corrêa et al. (2013)	Melanism
Agelasticus thilius	Capão da Canoa	RS	WA1147900	Progressive greying
Cacicus haemorrhous	Afonso Cláudio	ES	WA913838	Pastel dilution
	Irati	PR	WA642294	Progressive greying
	Faxinal dos Guedes	SC	Meyer & Crozariol (2020)	Progressive greying
Chrysomus ruficapillus	Miranda	MS	WA102226	Progressive greying
	Arroio Grande	RS	ML82448681	Progressive greying
	Palmares do Sul	RS	WA375931	Progressive greying
	Rio Grande	RS	Machado-Teixeira & Dias (2025)	Progressive greying
	Rio Grande	RS	WA170847	Progressive greying
	Rio Grande	RS	WA575316	Progressive greying
	Uruguaiana	RS	WA864691	Pastel dilution
	Doutor Pedrinho	SC	Meyer & Crozariol (2020)	Progressive greying
	Canas	SP	ML610012362	Progressive greying
	Franca	SP	WA711256	Isabel dilution
	Tremembé	SP	ML214460071	Progressive greying
Gnorimopsar chopi	Alto Paraíso de Goiás	GO	WA1790878	Progressive greying
	Santo Antônio do Monte	MG	WA974444	Progressive greying
Icterus pyrrhopterus	Brasília	DF	WA5381724	Brown
	Goiânia	GO	WA1051124	Melanism (?)
	São José dos Campos	SP	ML638400480	Progressive greying
Molothrus bonariensis	Mundo Novo	MS	WA2881414	Albinism or leucism (?)
	Santa Maria	RS	Rödel et al. (2020)	Progressive greying
	Benedito Novo	SC	Meyer & Crozariol (2020)	Pastel dilution
	Salete	SC	Meyer & Crozariol (2020); WA378986	Progressive greying
	Brotas	SP	WA114211	Progressive greying
	Franco da Rocha	SP	WA1143148	Progressive greying
	Santo André	SP	WA406121	Progressive greying or leucism (?)

Molothrus oryzivorus	Botucatu	SP	Present study	Ino or leucism (?)

Progressive greying was the most frequently assigned diagnosis (n = 21; 65.6%), followed by dilution (n = 4; 12.5%), including two cases of Pastel dilution and two of Isabel dilution. Brown and melanism were each represented by one unequivocal record (3.1% each), whereas five records (15.6%) could not be confidently assigned to a single category. Some of these atypical phenotypes are particularly informative regarding the contribution of different pigments to normal plumage coloration. The Red-rumped Cacique from Afonso Cláudio, Espírito Santo (WA913838), was diagnosed as Pastel dilution and exhibited a pale, warm-toned plumage in which the contribution of phaeomelanin may have become more apparent following the reduction of darker melanin pigmentation. Such cases illustrate how atypically colored individuals documented on online ornithological platforms may reveal pigmentation patterns or components that are otherwise masked in normal plumage (Aguillon & Shultz 2023). Similarly, the Variable Oriole from Goiânia, Goiás (WA1051124), exhibited a predominantly yellowish phenotype that could superficially suggest xanthism. However, under current terminology, this phenotype may be more appropriately interpreted as melanism, because melanism may involve changes in the relative production or distribution of eumelanin and phaeomelanin and does not necessarily produce a uniformly darker bird (van Grouw 2021; Cadena-Ortiz et al. 2024). This record further illustrates the potential of atypical individuals to provide insights into the mechanisms underlying plumage color and pattern (Aguillon & Shultz 2023).

Assigning specific aberration categories based solely on photographs remains challenging and may lead to misclassification (van Grouw 2021). Several pigmentary aberrations may produce superficially similar phenotypes, while diagnostic features depend on the distribution and intensity of pigmentation in the plumage, eyes, bill, and feet. Image quality, lighting conditions, feather wear, and viewing angle may further obscure these characteristics. Some conditions may also require information unavailable from a single observation; for example, distinguishing progressive greying

from congenital depigmentation may require repeated observations of the same individual over time. These limitations were evident in our dataset, in which five individuals could plausibly be assigned to more than one aberration category.

The Giant Cowbird individual with aberrant plumage was recorded on 03 June 2024 at Fazenda Experimental Edgárdia, municipality of Botucatu, São Paulo, Brazil (22°49'26"S, 48°25'09"W, datum WGS84). The same individual had previously been observed on 31 May 2024 within an intraspecific flock of 38 individuals. On 03 June, it was photographed perched on a fence together with another 11 conspecifics. The individual exhibited predominantly whitish plumage, while the bill and feet retained visible dark pigmentation (Figure 2). Its behavior appeared typical of conspecifics, as it remained associated with the flock and perched normally. These characteristics rule out complete albinism, whereas ino or leucism remain plausible diagnoses. Inclement weather at the time of records precluded detailed observation of eyes and morphology color for a confident distinction among these possibilities. Thus, the record is treated as an uncertain plumage aberration.



Figure 2. Giant Cowbird *Molothrus oryzivorus* with aberrant plumage recorded in Botucatu, São Paulo, Brazil.

Overall, records of plumage aberrations in Brazilian Icteridae remain scarce and scattered, with only eight species documented to date. The three most frequently represented species Chestnut-capped Blackbird (n = 11), Shiny Cowbird (n = 7), and Grayish Baywing (n = 4) accounted for 68.8% of all records, indicating a strong concentration among a few taxa. Compared with some other passerine families, such as Thraupidae, relatively few cases have been reported in Icteridae. In addition to uneven sampling, biological and phenotype-specific detectability may contribute. The predominantly dark, melanin-rich plumage of many icterids could make strongly contrasting white feathers conspicuous, while subtler changes such as brown or dilution may be more difficult to recognize in field photographs; thus, detectability may differ among aberration types (van Grouw 2021, Aguillon & Shultz 2023).

Geographically, the concentration of 65.6% of records in states indicates a southern-southeastern bias in the available documentation. No records were found from the Amazon, Caatinga or Pantanal. Most platform-derived aberration records came from WikiAves, for which vegetation-level media are not readily obtainable. In contrast, Macaulay Library data indicate highest media-associated coverage in the Atlantic Forest, followed by the Cerrado, the Pantanal, the Amazon, the Pampa, and finally the Caatinga. The five Pampa records correspond to 0.006% of 79,375 media-associated observations, whereas the 22 Atlantic Forest records correspond to 0.002% of 1,094,173 media-associated observations (eBird Basic Dataset 2026). Given the very small number of aberrant records and the non-standardized nature of platform data, these values should not be interpreted as prevalence estimates or as evidence of meaningful differences. The absence of aberrant Icteridae records from some regions may be also attributed to observer-related biases, given that aberration reports are more numerous in species with larger populations, larger body size, and association with human settlements (Zbyryt et al. 2021).

The integration of online ornithological platform data proved essential for documenting these rare phenotypes across broad spatial scales. Macaulay Library and WikiAves provide extensive photographic documentation that facilitates the detection and re-evaluation of plumage anomalies. However, these records do not constitute a standardized sampling scheme. Geographic participation, observer density, and species-specific detectability can vary substantially among regions and taxa, thus future studies should incorporate standardized measures such as checklist effort, numbers of observers, and photographic coverage to evaluate spatial and taxonomic differences more rigorously. Nevertheless, the increasing availability of records from online ornithological platforms substantially expands our knowledge of these uncommon phenotypes and highlights the need for further studies to determine whether differences among taxa and regions are driven by intrinsic biological factors or by variation in sampling intensity and detectability.

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