

# YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

**Q** Among the hordes of Starlings coming to food in my garden in Bishopstone, East Sussex, is this leucistic juvenile (right). It is being fed by its normally coloured parents along with two 'normal' siblings. I was surprised to note its yellow bill and pink legs. Any thoughts on this? Will it moult into similarly coloured adult plumage? *Peter Wilson, via email*

**A** *Hein van Grouw of the Natural History Museum Bird Group in Tring, Hertfordshire, replies:* "Nice bird! It's not leucistic though. This Starling has a form of 'Ino' gene mutation in which the melanin pigment is almost uncoloured. The pigment granules are all present but the melanin synthesis process is incomplete, leaving them lacking most of the dark coloration. This results in the bird being very pale cream coloured, but not actually white. As the pigment is also very pale in the skin, the feet are pink and the bill yellow, the latter due to the carotenoid pigment which is normally underneath the dark melanin.

"If the bird survives, as an adult the plumage will be a slightly darker cream colour, as adult Starlings have darker plumage than juveniles. In fresh adult plumage, the typical white feather tips will be visible next to the cream colour of the rest of the feather. Mutations



like Ino, however, do bleach rapidly in daylight and the plumage will soon become almost pure white." ■

**Q** I took this photograph (right) in Sultanpur National Park, near Delhi, India, recently. Can you tell me if this is a Common Hawk Cuckoo or a Large Hawk Cuckoo? Unfortunately, the photo was taken at a distance and only shows the rear view of the bird. *Mervyn de Winter, via email*



**A** *Bird tour leader Mark Andrews replies:* "This ID is a bit of a headache, as there are features you either cannot see or aren't quite right. Thankfully, we do have a limited choice for whichever hawk cuckoo this might be. I think

it is a sub-adult Common Hawk Cuckoo based on the limited number of features that can be seen from this side-on shot. The upper breast barring is rather well defined and there is a hint of the rufous tones found above in this species. The uppertail has rather defined bars with two-toned coloration between, and the bars themselves rule out any smaller cuckoos. This individual is rather brown, but I suspect that the greyer areas around the face have been hidden by the light conditions and the distance from which the shot was taken." ■



**Q** Can you please help me to identify these birds which flew over the place we were staying in at Lajares, Fuerteventura, Canary Islands, in March this year (left)? There were 18 birds in total, and they looked white from a distance and had slow wing-beats. They did a circuit past us several times that day and then we never saw them again. *Sandra Hytch, via email*

**A** *David Callahan replies:* "The bulging retracted neck, dagger-like bill and long broad wings indicate that these birds are members of the heron family, while their compactness reveals that they are one of the smaller species. Many smaller herons or egrets appear white in flight, but closer inspection of the photograph shows that these birds are actually a pale grey underneath. Yellow legs and a black crown with a narrow white forehead can also be glimpsed, while a plain pale grey colour can also be seen on a few of the birds' bowed upperwings. These are all features diagnostic of Night Heron, an often communal species which is a regular spring passage migrant to the Canary Islands." ■